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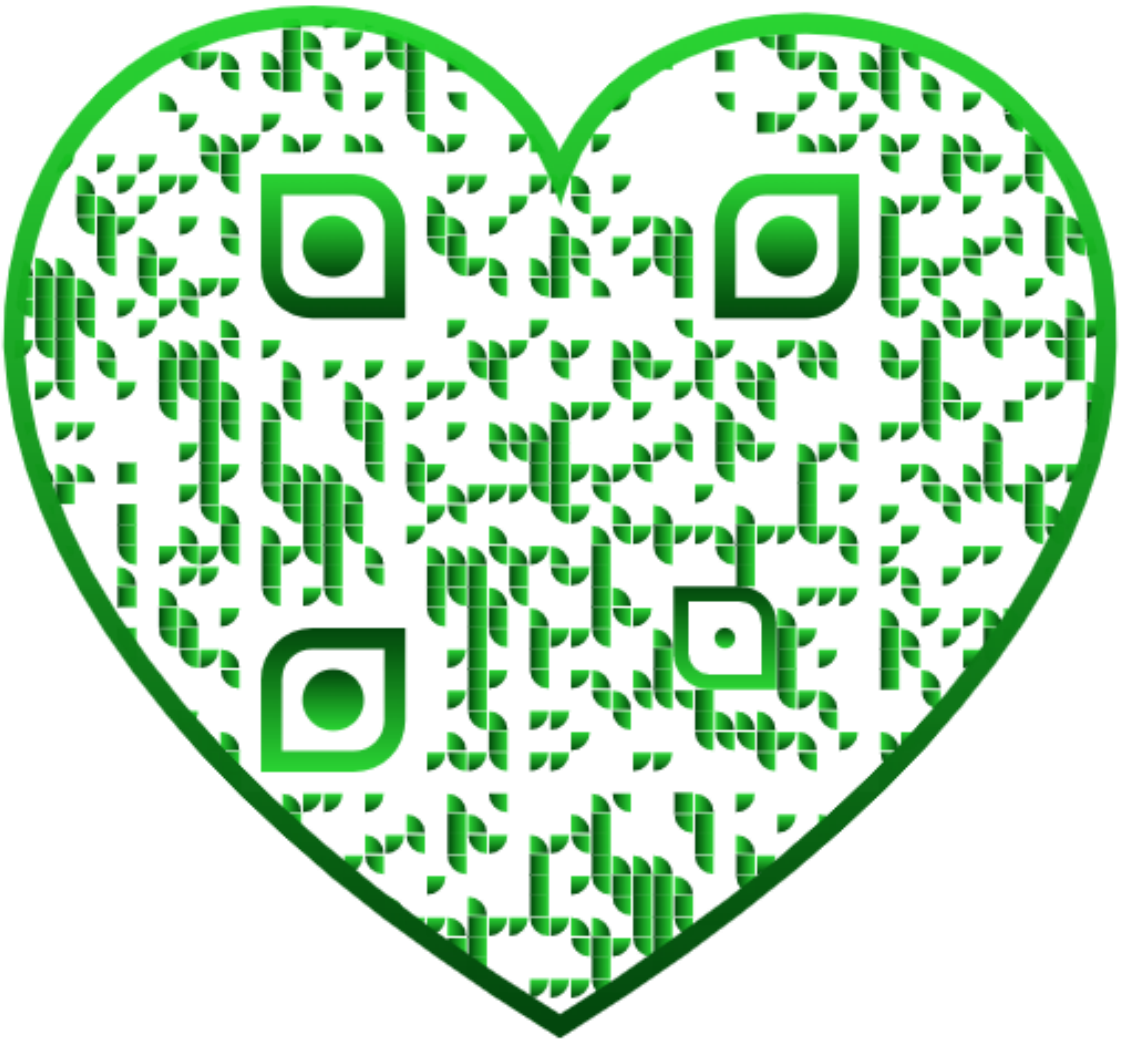

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From the album: Uninvited Guests
www.jamesonraid.co.uk

4. **From The Fire** - You Will Survive
From the album: Tribute to Jimi Jamison
www.from-the-fire.com

5. **Kristine** - Sleepless Nights
From the album: Kristine
http://twitter.com/kristineoffcial

6. **Lose Control** - King of It All
From the album: Let It Be Known
www.LoseControlRock.com

7. **Bohemian Lifestyle** - Third Longstreet Groove
From the album: Madame Libertanah
www.bohemianlifestyle.net

8. **Cats In Space** - Too Many Gods
From the album: Too Many Gods
www.facebook.com/catsinspaceband

9. **Art Nation** - Need You To Understand
From the album: Revolution
www.artnationswe.com

10. **Celia Rose** - Ten Thousand More
From the album: Zig Zag
www.celiarosemusic.com

11. **Grindhouse** - Nothing Gonna Stop Me
From the album: Chapter 1
www.grindhouse-band.com

12. **BabyJane** - Do Ya
From the album: Make It Sick
www.facebook.com/BABYJANE-110902428925603/timeline/

13. **Sleazy Way Out** - Satisfy Me
From the album: Satisfy Me!
www.sleazywayout.com

14. **King Of the North** - Paradise
From the album: Sound Of The Underground
www.kingofthenorth.com.au

15. **Silent Jack** - Play The Game
From the album: Play The Game
www.Silent-Jack.com

16. **Orbynot** - Revolution On My Mind
From the album: Without a Trace
www.orbynot.com

17. **Gaeleri** - Wannabe
From the album: Gates Of Rome
www.gaeleri.com

18. **Nitritt** - Slumber
From the album: Slumber
www.facebook.com/nitritt

19. **Room Experience** - Run To You
From the album: Room Experience
www.roomexperienceofficial.com

20. **Mysticity** - Ambassadors of the Hidden Sun
From the album: Ambassadors of the Hidden Sun
www.mysticity.com

21. **Kyrbgrinder** - Slipping Away
From the album: Chronicles Of A Dark Machine
www.facebook.com/Kyrbgrinder

22. **Hellbros** - Kill You
From the album: Hellbros
www.hellbros.net

23. **Sidewinder** - Ready to Rock
From the album: Sidewinder
www.sidewinderrocknroll.com

24. **To Have Balls** - Keep Calm
From the album: Stone & Snow
www.facebook.com/thbnsk?ref=bookmarks

25. **Graal** - Pick Up All The faults
From the album: Chapter IV
www.facebook.com/pages/Graalband/113158672030792?fref=ts

26. **Cybertoyz** - Dead Drive
From the album: Undo.Exit
www.facebook.com/Cybertoyz

27. **Aron Scott** - Blood Pudding
From the album: Earthquake
www.aron-scott.com

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From the album: Let's Break Some Hearts
www.facebook.com/RefillsPage

29. **BlindCat** - Ordinary Day
From the album: Black Liquid
www.facebook.com/TheBlindcatProject

30. **Leather Leaf** - The Storm
From the album: Aggravated
www.leatherleafrockband.com

31. **Jac Dalton** - PowderKeg
From the album: PowderKeg
www.facebook.com/JacDaltonBand/info?tab=page_info

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From the album: The Wrecking
www.homewreckr.com

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From the album: Salems Lott
www.salemslott.com

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From the album: Stunned
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www.slambango.net

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www.reverbnation.com/joelbeazer

37. **Damn Dice** - No Fear
From the album: The Great Unknown
www.damndice.com

38. **Hattie Green** - Burning Wheels
From the album: Banker's Dreamland
www.hattie-green.com

39. **Bad Wougar** - Dance Of The Flies
From the album: Bad Wougar
www.badwougar.com

40. **Devil's Dice** - Destiny Calling
From the album: Libertarian
www.devils-dice.co.uk

GROUP TWO: 70s RETRO ROCK, PSYCHEDELIC, & BLUES & SOUTHERN ROCK & AMERICANA/FOLK

41. **ShwizZ** - What Does This Mean
From the album: My Good Side/My Bad Side
www.shwizz.com

42. **Ra Rising** - Holy Man
From the album: Seize The Day
www-ra-rising.com

43. **Titanium Blue** - When I Fall
From the album: Titanium Blue
www.titaniumbluemusic.com

44. **Bret Coats** - Magic Man
From the album: Music For The People
www.bretcoats.com

45. **Debra D' Lane** - Memphis Without The Blues
From the album: Covered In Dirt
www. debradlanemusic.com

46. **Tom Turner and Slow Burn** - Higher Planes
From the album: Temple 128
www.tomturnerandslowburn.com

47. **Suzens Garden** - Sometimes
From the album: Stronger!
www.suzensgarden.de

48. **Black Cherry Perry** - Choke the Chicken
From the album: Mississippi Medicine Show
www.blackcherryperry.com

49. **Nice as Pie** - You Can't Take It With You
From the album: A Body Of Work
www.niceaspie.net

50. **Bodinrocker** - Rock It The Right Way
From the album: Rock It The Right Way
www.bodinrocker.se

51. **Phantom Riffage** - Television, Televise
From the album: Phantom Riffage
http://phantomriffage.bandcamp.com

52. **Le Zets** - Favor For a Favor
From the album: Deadweight
www.lezetsmusic.com

53. **Gary Eisenbraun** - Don't Save It For Me
From the album: Shell Game IV (Secret Pact)
www.gary-eisenbraun.com

54. **J Houston Band** - The Hunter
From the album: The Hunter
www.reverbnation.com/jhoustonband

GROUP THREE: PROGRESSIVE & PSYCHEDELIC ROCK

55. **CDFME** - Prologue, The Sprite White Shadow
From the album: Dark Matters
www.facebook.com/CDFmE

56. **Blackberry Tongues** - Rivers
From the album: We Are Open Mouths
www.blackberrytongues.com

57. **Shaded Gray** - The Narcissistic Divide
From the album: Constellations Collide
https://twitter.com/shadedgray1

58. **Voodoo Rays** - Orpheus
From the album: Voodoo Rays
www.facebook.com/VoodouRays

59. **Othership** - Broken Beast
From the album: Circuitry
www.othership.com

60. **Bedcrumbs** - The Pomona Kid
From the album: The Pomona Kid
http://nicholaschacon.bandcamp.com

61. **Liberty's Exiles** - Another Page To Turn
From the album: The Price Of Immortality
www.libertysexiles.weebly.com

GROUP FOUR: SYMPHONIC ROCK/ POWER METAL AND HEAVY METAL

62. **Crimson Chryalis** - Burning With Fire
From the album: Enraptured
www.crimsonchrysalis.com

63. **Soul Secret** - Downfall
From the album: 4
www.soulsecret.net

64. **Space Mirrors** - Burning Chaplet
From the album: Stella Polaris
www.spacemirrors.com

65. **Isurus** - Logos
From the album: Logocharya
www.isurusband.com

66. **Sorrowfield** - The Other Side
From the album: The Great Abduction
www.sorrowfield.de

67. **Phantom** - Abduction
From the album: Psycho Minds
www.facebook.com/pages/ntom/380117888687376?ref=bookmarks

68. **Memento Waltz** - Omicron
From the album: Division By Zero
www.mementowaltz.com

69. **Malevolents** - Into Darkness
From the album: Face The Music
www.facebook.com/liam.borns?fref=ts

70. **Proto Kult** - Desert Scourge
From the album: No Beer In Heaven
www.protokult.com

71. **Carbonine** - Say I Am
From the album: Rebirth
www.facebook.com/carboninemusic

72. **Valous** - Irot
From the album: The Devil's Seven
www.valous.co.uk

73. **Horizon's Edge** - Vagabond 509
From the album: Horizon's Edge
www.facebook.com/horizonsedgeofficial?fref=ts

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74. **Berry Quincy** - Old Man
From the album: Tuesday
www.berryquincy.be

75. **Even Twice** - Audio Detective
From the album: At Least Following
www.facebook.com/eventwicerocks

76. **Leeds Point** - How Far Down
From the album: The Hooded Ones
www.facebook.com/leedspointband

77. **Grice** - Incomplete
From the album: Alexandrine
www.gricemusic.co.uk

78. **Orca** - Amber
From the album: Universe
www.orcaband.com

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EDITORIAL

One of the vagaries of Rock Music I have come to witness over the years is that the bigger and more successful a band are, the less exciting their new albums seem to be for me. I remember the halcyon days of the 80s when the likes of 'Back In Black', 'Number of the Beast', 'Screaming For Vengeance', 'New Jersey' and 'Storyteller's Night' were played to death and held this young Metal-head in total awe. However, these days releases from those classic bands rarely move me, and make me think they have lost the magic while merely going through the motions; where does that magic go? Why can those same musicians not rediscover the magic that enthralled a movement? Sure, I know many still love the albums being released by those bands – but not me. So it makes my heart truly sing when I hear the latest releases from Def Leppard, Queensryche, Stryper and WASP, proving to me that some classic bands still have the hunger, desire and talent to continue writing great music and giving the fans what they want.

All four of these bands are interviewed in this issue of Fireworks, with Def Leppard going the extra mile and giving us wonderful interviews with Phil Collen and a surprisingly open and frank Vivian Campbell. Music like this reminds me why I fell in love with Hard Rock and Metal so many years ago, and re-energises my faith in the genre.

The Leppard and WASP interviews were of considerable length, but rather than edit them we decided to represent them here in all their glory. With all the other wonderful material we had, this meant giving you an extra 16 pages at no extra cost, as well as the additional content on the CD this issue; as well as the usual The Music Is Out There column, we have a wonderful interview with Berlin's Terri Nunn, conducted at her own home in California, along with From The Fire and Jac Dalton. So really, that's over 130 pages and a CD with 78 songs for the crazy cheap price of £4.99. Enjoy!

There will still be additional interviews going up on our website at www.rocktopia.co.uk, where we have just added our FOUR THOUSANDTH album review! So please be sure to head on over and check us out online.

The Ten 12" picture disk is still on schedule for early December delivery – just in time for Christmas and the perfect stocking filler. Pre-orders available at www.rocktopiarecords.com along with the CD version, 'Albion' (also in strictly limited red vinyl!) and signed copies of 'Isla De Murta'.

Right, I'm off to listen to the new WASP album again. A classic! See you all again in December!

Bruce

W.A.S.P.

Ant Heeks in conversation with Blackie Lawless.

Blackie Lawless is something of an enigma. Though raised as a Christian, he strayed from the Church in his late teens and began studying the Occult. For years he and his band W.A.S.P. were the scourge of the PMRC thanks to their shock-rock antics and sexually orientated lyrics, yet in recent years Blackie has returned to his faith and this has now become the motivation for his lyrics. After thirty years in the business, W.A.S.P. are now set to release the stunning 'Golgotha', their fifteenth album and first for new label Napalm Records. Yet when asked about initial feedback of the album, Blackie is surprisingly humble.

"It would be embarrassing if I told you what people have been saying, so I'll just leave it up to you guys to tell me what you think. Everybody's been very kind so far, let's put it that way."

The album has been four years in the making, why has it taken so long?

"We started it in Spring 2011 and in 2012 we went on the 30th Anniversary tour, that took six months. In the following May I broke my leg real bad and lost the rest of that year, so if you look at total combined time it was right at two years. It looks like a lot because it's been a while since the release of the last record. We're also at a point in our career where the first thing you ask yourself is "do you want quality or quantity?" and I know the obvious answer would be both, but we're at a point where we have to consider our legacy now, and in a time where a lot of bands either don't make records any more or really don't care about the quality of the records that they make, if we're going to do one it's important that we do the best we can. Because, quite frankly, the only way to make an expensive sounding record is spend the money and invest the time, and we still do it the old-fashioned way, we still record on two inch tape. Whether my opinion or your opinion of the record is that it's a good record or not, that's subjectively speaking, but one thing I do know that's a fact, sonically this record competes with anything that's out there. It is what it is and it speaks for itself, and the only way to do that is the money."

Have Napalm records been a part of that?

"Well, we had made the record in a large part before we even signed, because one of the best investments I ever made, prior to making 'The Crimson Idol', I built the studio that we have now and it was probably the single greatest investment I ever made. It allowed me to create a laboratory where you can go in and experiment for days on end and not worry about watching the clock."

You've previously stated that if you make a record over a long period of time, the record you begin making is not necessarily the record you end up finishing, so has 'Golgotha' ended up how you originally intended it?

"From the idea perspective, yes. Sonically we had to go back and remix the record pretty much, because we had done half the record before we did the 2012 tour and by the time we got towards the end of it, sonically things were changing and we had to go back and make it all sound like it was one cohesive package. I always shy away from telling people what I think initially because all bands say the same thing, "this is the best record we've ever made", really no, it takes you a while to get away from it. From a sonic perspective, absolutely, from a creative standpoint, I'll leave that up to you guys."

So what inspired you to use 'Golgotha' as the title and what is the meaning of it?

"'Golgotha' is a Hebrew word meaning "the place of the skull". It's where Christ was crucified, and myself being a born-again Christian, I look at writing lyrics through the eyes of my faith now, so I see everything through that filter, and I thought it was a really great idea, you know? The title track, well we know that's where Jesus was crucified, but we also know that there were two other guys that were crucified at the same time, both thieves, one believed and one did not, so I thought it would be interesting to write the lyrics from the perspective of the believing thief. Because the guy is hanging on the Cross, he knows it's not maybe, he knows he's going to die, it's just a matter of time now, and a very short time at that, and you can see them having a conversation, he's talking to Jesus while they're there on the Cross and Biblically speaking we know that's a fact because we know that a conversation took place, and he asks him point blank "are you really who you say you are, are you really who people claim you are?" Later in the song he cries out "Jesus I need you now!", this is written from the perspective of a man who knows he's going to die. You've heard the expression before that death is the great equaliser, well one of the things it does, if you've ever been faced with anything like being given a diagnosis of something that's potentially catastrophic or life-threatening, you talk about putting things under a microscope and putting it into focus, it gets your attention in a way that few things can even begin to equal. So I thought that whether anybody in the modern-day world is hanging on a Cross or not, it doesn't really matter so much, but it's written in a way that if there's anything anybody has ever gone though that's potentially catastrophic in their lives, I thought they could relate to it, it's an interesting subject matter, an interesting way of approaching it."

In the early Shock-Rock days of

W.A.S.P. you were known for your sexually explicit lyrics, yet now your lyrics revolve around your faith and religious beliefs, so what kind of lyrics do you find easier to write?

"Well, going back, this started pretty much with 'The Headless Children'. It's interesting because even before I returned to my faith it's pretty evident that subconsciously that stuff was rattling around in my head. I mean the title track, the first line in the first verse is "Father come save us from this madness we're under, God of creation, are we blind?" I had this conversation with Alice Cooper not long ago, Alice too is born again, and he too was saying the same thing, that if you go back and look at a lot of his early work, those records were laced with those ideas, it's interwoven in there, you do it subconsciously, and you're not aware you're even doing it, but you do it."

So what drove you to later return to your Christianity?

"I started out in the Church when I was a kid, I went all through my teenage years, I went because I wanted to, nobody made me go, and then I left the Church and came to California and went as far away as I could go. I ended up here in L.A. and I ended up studying the Occult for three years, and after three years I realised that there was no truth in it and I walked away from that as well. So even still I'm at two extremes of basically, I wouldn't say the same direction, but I was looking for truth. So after that I go around for twenty years just bumping into walls and thinking I'm mad at God because of the indoctrination I received as a kid, I think my head's screwed up. And I realised after twenty years I was not mad at God, I was mad at Man! Because of the indoctrination I had received as a kid. At the same time I had to answer some questions for myself, I said "the first thing I need to do is try to cleanse myself of all this indoctrination", and the way I need to do that is prove to myself that the Bible is a Fairy Tale. We know it was written by men but the Bible also says that those men were inspired directly by God himself, and I though "I don't believe that for a minute!" So I had to prove this to myself, I thought "I'm going to get this thing and I'm going to go through it and start picking it apart little by little." So what I discover on that journey is sixty-six books written by forty different authors spread out over three different continents over a two-thousand year period, most of them did not know each other, had no idea who each other was because they lived at different times. But what I slowly start to discover is that these guys, although they have no knowledge of each other, are answering each other's questions, they're finishing each other's sentences. Now I know, just from general life experience, if you take ten people and put them in a room and try to get them to agree on something it's never gonna happen, so how do you take forty different authors and not only get them to agree, but also answer each other's questions as if they're sitting in the same room together. And we know that secular history tells us that, the things I'm saying about their origins, where they were, the times that they lived, we know that's a historical fact, not just what the Bible claims it to be. So these guys are doing this stuff, that got my attention, and one day I was reading and it hit me like a shot and I realised that I was reading the infallible word of the living God, it was like somebody hit me between the eyes. That's when it all became clear to me, and I was really only scratching the surface, what I've discovered since then is mind-blowing! It's there for anybody, the first thing you have to do is get your heart out of the way, I was just like everybody else, I didn't want to believe it, the difference between me and everybody else is that it was nagging at me, I didn't feel like I could relax. I had to know for sure, and answer to myself once and for all, then I could go on and live my life as the heathen I was (laughs), and relax. And when I put it to the test, I quickly found it's the only book that when you read it, it reads you. That's the story."

Knowing what you know now, do you ever have any regrets about the direction you took W.A.S.P. and your lyrics in the early days?

"No, because everything has led me to the point where I am right at this moment. From my belief and perspective I've been forgiven, so I can put all that behind me. But like I said, from a career perspective it's all taken me to this point, if you want to look at the line in the sand, I would still go back and make 'Headless…', because I was making those changes from what I thought was a purely moral perspective, even then, because I had reached a point where I said "I can't continue trying to write songs about my girlfriend's high-heel shoes anymore!" There was just no point in it. I understand that Rock 'n' Roll is Rock 'n' Roll and that's okay, there's a place for that. I saw just the other day that most hit Pop songs are written on a third-grade level and it's kinda sad, you know, because I'm thinking to myself if you're going to have a real career, and I don't mean five or six years, I'm talking ten or twenty years or longer, you look back at your career and think "did you say anything with what you did, did you help anybody, did you say anything positive?" Kind of like the Horace Mann statement where he said "it would be a shame to die without winning some victory for mankind." In other words, what's the totality of our lives worth?"

One of the things I find fascinating is that you still have your signature W.A.S.P. sound that hasn't really changed that much, it's just the lyrics that have developed, so do you think that the fans who got into W.A.S.P. in the Shock-Rock days have stuck with you all the way?

"An interesting phenomena has happened over the years, when you turn an audience over, and what I mean by that is, if you can recruit younger fans, you get this very unusual thing, because the people who were there in the beginning can see the changes happening. The fanbase who were not there in the beginning doesn't have that limitation, they only see it as a complete body of work, they see the records change but they weren't there to see that change happen organically, if you know what I mean, they weren't there when the line in the sand happened. Now, as a writer's perspective, that's having your cake and eating it too, because you are getting judged based on a whole body of work rather than an era that somebody may have lived through, where they saw the social change and the changes in the band personnel. Nowadays the fanbase are looking at it as a book with multiple chapters, which as a writer that's the way you're going to want it to be seen, as you get the best of both worlds when it comes to that."

When you're in the public eye do you feel that you become Blackie Lawless the alter-ego but when you're at home alone you're just Steven Duren, in the same way that Vincent Furnier becomes Alice Cooper?

"No, I don't think so. Probably early on I did, but now I'm writing from a perspective of my heart or what I'm really feeling and thinking, so I don't really feel any differentiation or separation. What people are hearing and seeing, that's what you get. I would say if there's anything about me that people may find unusual, is that I'm a bit more of a recluse than people think. I live about an hour and a half North of L.A., and where I live is all ranch properties, there's more cows and horses than people. I've been that way since the mid-eighties. We went through all that PMRC stuff years ago and it really changed me, I realised pretty quickly that although I thought I was being motivated by fame, which most performers are, I was not, and also going through that PMRC stuff and getting shot at and all that garbage, I started to invert and became a lot less social because of it, and it's something that I think probably subconsciously affects me to this day."

You've been through such a lot and have such a story to tell, have you ever considered writing an autobiography?

"Well I did those fifteen chapters for the tour three years ago and I'm in the process of doing six more right now, and that ended up being fairly autobiographical enough to the point where people get the drift of where I am going, and besides that I give it to them for free on the website. It's pretty much there, whether I give it to them all in one sitting probably won't happen! Also, quite honestly, I've always kind of shied away from doing that kind of thing, because when I do a chapter at a time on the website I can control it and not worry about what a publishing company is going to say about what they want me to write, because let's be honest to do those kind of books, a lot of time they want you to write about other people and start dishing the dirt. I don't want to do that. I've said this before but it's true, if those other guys want to tell all their sordid stories that's their business, that's not for me to do."

'Golgotha' is being released thirty years after the debut W.A.S.P. album, when you started the band did you ever envisage that you would last this long?

(Laughs) "Well, when we first landed in the U.K., we actually did two weeks of pre-production and rehearsals in Brixton, a lot of people don't know that, but we were there for quite a while before we started the tour, and in the process of pre-production we did a lot of press and I kept hearing one question over and over and that was "so do you think you're going to be around five years from now?" The first couple of times I heard it I thought it was a little strange, then two weeks goes by and I'm doing ten interviews a day and I'm hearing it in every interview and I'm thinking "are these guys singling me out, why am I so special?!" I didn't realise that every new band gets that question, but I remember my response to them was "I don't even know if I'm going to be around five months from now, much less five years, and besides, I just got here, will you just let me enjoy this for five minutes? Let me have my moment in the sun, it took me a long time to get here!" It's funny because all these years later, that question still rings in my ears, "do you think you're going to be around in five years?" Well, it's been that, and then some! I look back and think to myself, what's the probability of it, and it's not a lot. Kids ask me for advice, they say "how do I get from where I am to where you are?" I tell them that showbusiness isn't looking for people who want to do this, it's looking for people who MUST do this, and there's a huge difference between want and must. Because everybody wants, but few are willing to pay the price that accompanies must, and that's when you find out how bad you want it. The song 'Last Runaway' is all about that, I've never written a song about myself before until now and really that song is all about what happened to me coming here to L.A. I had my fortieth anniversary of coming here as a teenager last month. I was scared out of my wits, and what I found when I got here was that the stories that I heard when I got here pale by comparison to what was real. I was homeless for a year and a half, I was sleeping on people's floors, it was rough, it was beyond what you could imagine. While we're telling the story right now it goes by pretty quickly, it may sound horrific while the story is being told but it's over to the listener after the story finishes, but living it when it goes on day after day, month after month, year after year, that's when you really find out how bad you want it. When I tell people that there's a quantum difference between want and must, there also is something else – it chooses you, you don't choose it, there is a lot to be said for that. If a kid says he wants to do this for a living, I tell him "if you think that you cannot live without this, then go for it, see what happens. Better to try and fail than turn forty and look in the mirror and say "I didn't give it a shot because I didn't have the guts", that would be hard to live with. But if you think for one moment you can live without this I strongly urge you to seek another line of employment, because you will not make it." I know that sounds cruel and callous, but I didn't make the rules here, it is what it is, and I'm just another participant."

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GENTLEMANS PISTOLS

Back in 2011, Gentlemans Pistols seemed to be on the up. Second album 'At Her Majesty's Pleasure' was receiving positive reviews packed with critical acclaim for their classic guitar based Heavy Rock sound. And with new guitarist Bill Steer (from Death-Metal band Carcass) on board they undertook a couple of healthy support tours, a few gigs of their own and even a slot at the High Voltage festival. But it then all went a bit quiet. Now back with a new album 'Hustler's Row' and signed to a new record label, Ian Parry caught up with singer guitarist and main writer James Atkinson to find out what's been happening in the Pistols' camp and do they have some catching up to do?

"Well someone pointed out that there are four year gaps between the year the band was formed and each album release so we thought we would stick to tradition, ha ha! Seriously though, it's just down to the usual story, band members leaving, other commitments and then ultimately the switch from one label to another isn't something that happens overnight," replied James – and as for any lost momentum?

"To a certain extent yes, but that's fine. When we announced we were doing the new album I was pretty overwhelmed at the response from people that had been waiting. It kind of feels like the whole band blueprint of releasing a record a year and having a short career are behind us. A lot of the songs were put together after the second album so there was never really a feeling of coming back fresh in that respect. Having time to work on the vocal and guitar harmonies was great though. Also getting new blood in the band (bass player Robert Threapleton) helped to revitalise my passion for it."

The new album is being released on Nuclear Blast, suggesting having a major label behind you will help make an impact.

"It came through the Carcass connection. Both Bill and Jeff (Walker – Carcass bass/vocals) made the label aware of the band and it just went on from there really. It's great to be working with the label and to be doing so much press before the album release. We are all really proud of this record, so to be seeing the amount of effort that the label are putting into promotion is really cool."

With James' influences including the likes of 70s rockers The Sweet and Deep Purple the band have always had the unashamedly Classic Rock feel to them, but most impressive of all on 'Hustler's Row' is Bill Steer's guitar work – especially as his other band Carcass aren't one you would really associate with Gentlemans Pistols – something that James is quick to confirm.

"I think I need to say here how much of an amazing player Bill is and how he can pick up on something immediately and work with it. With our second album, most of it was demoed with our original lead guitarist as it appears on the record so there wasn't a huge amount of room for Bill to change anything. With Hustler's Row, we purposefully sat down and worked on the harmony stuff together. It's been very easy to do that and as I said before, I think that can only be down to the fact that Bill can turn his hand to almost anything with the guitar. Bill used to have a band called Firebird which played in a similar vein to Pistols. We got to know each other from gigs and we ended up doing some tours together and hit it off. When Chris (Rogers – previous guitarist) left it seemed natural to ask Bill to join and luckily for us he said yes."

On past showings Gentlemans Pistols are a band that excel on stage and the new album seems to be perfect to be played live.

"We've had 'Personal Fantasy Wonderland' in the set for a good while now. 'The Searcher', 'Time Wasters' and 'Stress And Confusion' have had their outings too. There will be plenty more though when we get out there. We have a record release gig in London on October 19th then we are hopefully going to do more UK dates before the end of the year. There are also a few European dates being worked out and we will be at Roadburn Festival in the Netherlands next year too."

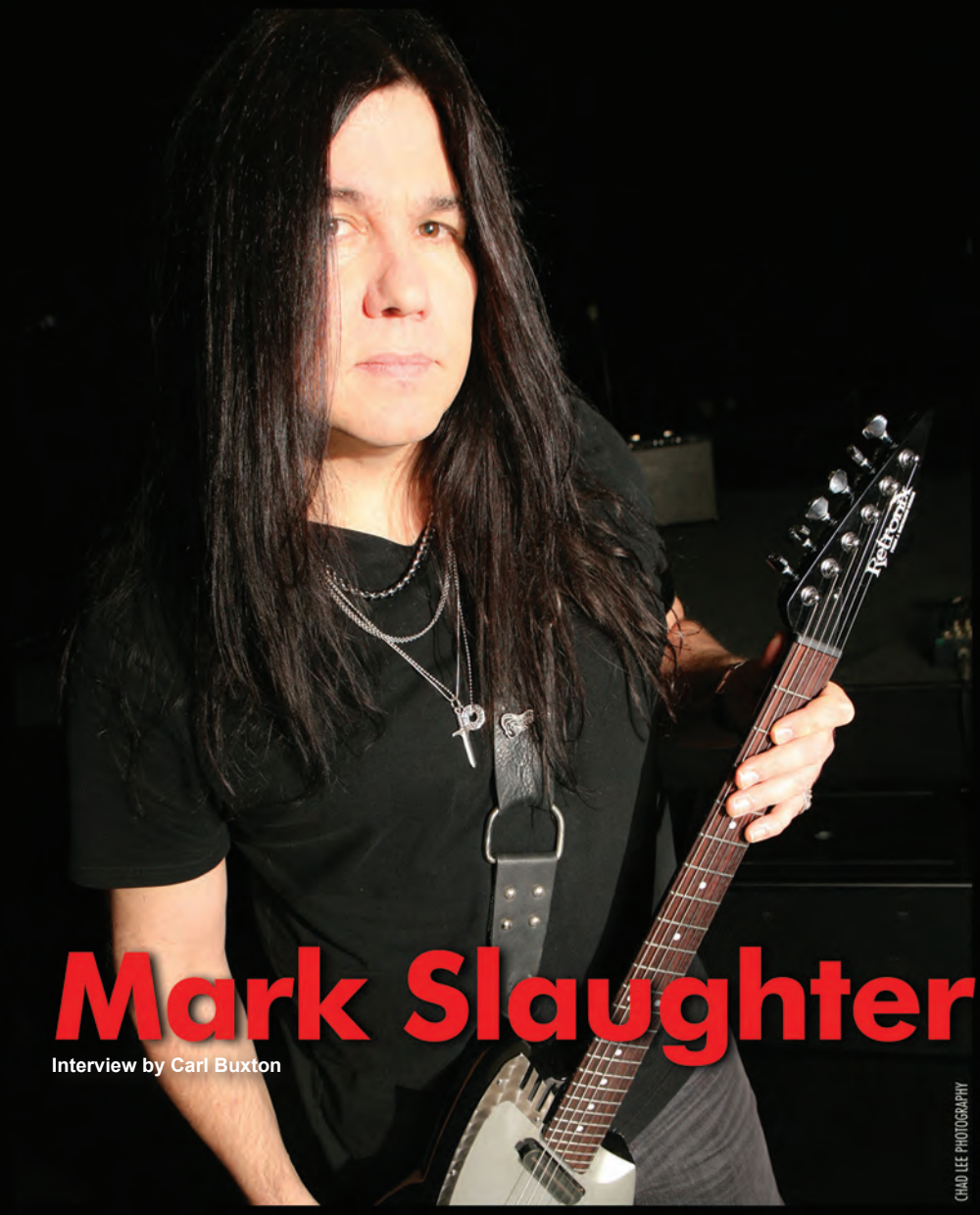
I question which type of live show James prefers, the smaller gigs or Festivals?

"Both have their merits. With the bigger support slots you get more exposure, but you don't play as long and can't do as much of a varied set. For me, nothing beats playing in a smaller room with sweat dripping off the ceiling though. Well we knew when we asked him to join that Carcass were a busy band. They are also a favourite of mine so I'm happy to see them out there playing big gigs. As far as I'm aware, there haven't been any clashes to date."

James Atkinson isn't interested in following any fads or fashions with his band. Big guitar harmonies are what define Gentlemans Pistols. As for the success of the album, it's more about the making of a piece of work that meets his own standards.

"With any record, the success for me is in the creation of it above anything else. If people like it and buy it then it's all a bonus. There's really no point in having expectations as it only leads to disappointment. The only real conscious moves that I made with this record were to work on vocal melody more and then in turn the harmonies. Everything else is just as it happened. With the mix though, I always wanted the guitars to be dominant as I felt it added more excitement to the overall sound."

And to that end the album is already a success. But don't think the band's ambitions stop there. If classic big guitar riffs and some stunning solos are your thing, make a note that 'Hustler's Row' is released on 16 October in CD and vinyl formats.



Mark Slaughter

Interview by Carl Buxton

CHAD LEE PHOTOGRAPHY

Mark Slaughter came to everyone's attention back in 1988 with the release of Vinnie Vincent Invasion's 'All Systems Go' album. He then went on to form the multi-million selling band of his own name who survived the tragic loss of guitarist Tim Kelly to continue performing and releasing albums into the 2000s. In order to survive the Grunge wave of the 90s it was necessary to explore other avenues and so Mark diversified into film work, voice overs and some producing, and has come full circle with the release of his first solo album 'Reflections In A Rear View Mirror'. Skyping him at his home in Nashville, Mark revealed himself to be a very engaging and most courteous host and in between discussing life-changing experiences by narrowly avoiding a tornado he was watching that jumped over Wolf Hoffmann's farmhouse where he was recording at Michael Wagener's studio, and comparing our respective guitars, Mark asked me if I'd had a chance to live with the record at all…

Yeah, absolutely. (I show him my bought copy).

That's a different packaging *[to my US version]*. I made a deal with Escape Music there. Here in the United States and Canada I'm basically the label because there's basically no label. It's a really odd thing, but it's like one of those things with music, I'm really at this stage that it's about making art and not really worrying about where it's gonna go. You get to the point where you stop thinking about it and start producing art so that's really where my headspace is on this whole thing. It's just making a record that hopefully people will identify with.

The production on there, and the mixing and mastering by Michael Wagener, is astonishing.

I engineered it and played everything on it except the drums, but he mixed and mastered it. There's a thing that Michael does and it's so hard to let go of your art, again, you get so wrapped up in it. But he's so great, and such a nice guy, such a pleasure to work with. That's really the nice part of it – working with people that you really enjoy working with and he's just an awesome person! We kind of live in this bubble here - that's what the song 'Somewhere Isn't Here' is kind of about. I think that America is very guilty of living in this frickin' bubble that is so oblivious to the rest of the world. Our news is bullshit, I mean I watch BBC and I watch other news sources because there's so much propaganda in it *[U.S. news corporations]* that they're not even talking about the real issues of the world. It's just crazy - that song was about somebody, you know, like "I lost my mind today because somebody made my cappuccino wrong", which is the frickin' typical American response and I wanted to write a song about that bubble that we all live in.

Discussing the various bands that we grew up listening to, including ABBA, the Bee Gees and The Police, Mark had this to say:

It's funny, it's one of those things that a lot of Metal heads would not like to admit to, that they like ABBA or the Bee Gees except it's so well written, and it's the same thing with Earth Wind And Fire, those records are put together so incredibly well and I think that's really where I was at when I was doing this record – it's about the songs. It's not about "I'm just gonna do an AC/DC record." I mean I love AC/DC and I love Led Zeppelin but I just wanted to do a record where the song took the precedent as opposed to me trying to guide the ship. I let the song guide it where, as that's a totally different thing than how I would usually write. Paul Hamer (customers included Kiss, Bad Company and Def Leppard) made a guitar for me, this is before I even played with Vinnie Vincent. Paul Hamer thought I was a great guitar player – I played at the NAMM show at his booth, that's what I did, I was a guitar teacher. So this was before I even put the guitar down to sing, I was out there just ripping away you know…but it's a very interesting side to it because I really love playing guitar but people are like, "Shut up with your guitar playing and sing." But I love playing – I just love it!

I can't believe people would just say that – it's just plain rude!

You know, I just think that people expect that from me. It's kind of one of those things – I really pushed being a lead singer more than I pushed guitar playing. On this record that I did here I really tried to make it where there was a balance. I was making music and not worried about where it was going, so guitar-wise I was able just to *really* get into it, and bass and keys and all the orchestration that you can do. Nowadays you can do orchestras by playing one violin at a time with the samples that I've got that are what (Grammy and Emmy award winner) Danny Elfman (The Simpsons/Tim Burton/ Desperate Housewives) is using in film. Mark Goodin who plays drums on this record was in Las Vegas – we were never in the same city at one time.

I checked him out and he's just phenomenal.

He's a session guy and when you get to be my age it's more about friendships and people you know who are good but never had that break where people recognise your brilliance, and he's one of those guys. When we were in rival bands when I was a kid I was like, "We should do something" and he was like, "You know, that would be great." So I started sending him the tracks, he'd send me the tracks back, then I'd re-tune the bass to what he was playing on the drums. So I got this thing between the two of us, with the rhythm section on this stuff that's just tighter than mother-fuckers, it's because we really listened and worked together kind of progressively, kind of like what Steve Harris would do with Nicko (McBrain), or Geddy (Lee) would do with Neil (Peart), it's just that really tight base of the rhythm section that makes the whole record stronger because there's that going on underneath it.

And you've guys have hung out since you were teenagers haven't you?

Yeah, exactly.

You can just tell. I was checking out his website and went back and listened to the album and concentrated on the drums and percussion and whilst listening intently, I could make out the latino rhythms he was doing, the Jazz work that's involved in there, and the Hard Rock over the top, and it's just phenomenal. It's not immediately obvious.

I was really loving the fact that we were able to put that, for a musician like you who understands it and hears it, it's there, but it's not hitting people over the head with it to say, "Yeah, we're gonna be progressive, and we're gonna do it", and again, Winery Dogs are brilliant, I love that fucking record, but it's a lesser progressiveness. But some of that shit is still going on underneath there it's just not hitting you over the head with it.

You've got to find that balance between not being so focussed on making an album for musicians, but you've also got to allow for the general public to be able to soak it up as well. Winger have definitely found that balance. You've got the Zeppelin feel going on with 'Baby Wants' with the smooth melodies and stuff going on in there, 'Don't Turn Away' is very much like Nelson and that's kind of obvious with your connection. 'Carry Me Back Home' has that Country feel, lead-off track 'Away I Go' is typical Slaughter – contemporary Slaughter for 'The Real Thing' – I mean I don't know if you agree with me on all of this…

Yeah, it really is that but it didn't start out as I'm making a record, it was more about writing songs and having things all the way through but, you know, I got a couple of songs in and when I didn't give up on that I was like, you know, I should just put out a whole record without worrying about how much is it going to sell? What's it gonna do? How are people going to think about it? Because we've always done quality stuff with Slaughter, we've really pre-thought a lot of things out with it, and this really was more of a thing of just 'well I'm an artiste and I have to stop over-thinking it and just make art. To the people who have supported the band Slaughter and also to those who've picked up this record or thinking of picking up this record, and again it's the fans that support, whether it be Raven, whether it be Led Zeppelin or Def Leppard or whoever it might be, if you've supported this type of music my hat's off to you because it's my love too. We all have this common ground and I thank you for sharing that with me along the way.

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- Ant Heeks, Fireworks

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"ALL HAIL THE NEW KINGS OF DENMARK! - This is a quote from one of the leading rock magazines in the world, Classic Rock Magazine (UK), when they reviewed the debut album. Now the band is back with a vengeance with the second album Glorified"

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Powerplay
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"Big on melody and harmonies, the soundscapes on 'All Those Years' are moody, melodic, smoky and above all; it is absolute sonic ear candy! Is that West Coast style of music still alive? It certainly is aided by the sheer calibre of these five musicians"
- Bruce E.J Atkinson, Fireworks

Out 4th of September 2015 on CD and digital

Bullet Train Blast
Shake Rattle Racing

Third album from this kick-ass rock'n'roll band. For fans of Black Stone Cherry, Guns 'N' Roses & Tesla.
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8/10 - Powerplay (UK)
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In the last few years Stryper singer and guitarist Michael Sweet has become the poster boy for hard working musicians everywhere, writing, recording and producing a solo album, a well-received collaboration with Lynch Mob guitarist George Lynch, writing an autobiography and working with Benediction's Veronica Freeman. On top of all that there's the not inconsiderable output from Stryper themselves, whose new album 'Fallen' will be the sixth release by the band in the same number of years. Inevitably he was busy working away from home as Fireworks' interview deadline came and went, but made himself available on the day he got back for another chat with Phil Ashcroft.

"Sorry, I was out in Los Angeles," he apologises needlessly. "I played a solo show and we did a couple of video shoots. I'm home now, writing for my next solo album, which I intend to start recording in a month and a half or so. So, keeping busy!"

A powerful statement, 'Fallen' carries on the aggressive vibe of the last album with its angry title-track and striking cover artwork from Stan Decker.

"I wanted something fitting for the sound," states Sweet. "This album is very heavy for Stryper, it's got a bit of a darker sound to it, I think even more so than 'No More Hell To Pay'. I wanted a lyric that would portray that and go like a glove on a hand and fit it perfectly, and equally important was the artwork, the image portrays Lucifer being cast out of Heaven, which is what the song 'Fallen' is about. It was important to me and I think the song is a perfect tune to get the lyric across, and vice versa, and the imagery on the cover is perfect, I think Stan has just hit it out of the park."

The heavier nature of recent Stryper records has come about for various reasons, as Michael explains.

"I think a part of it is that I've been listening to a lot of the stuff I grew up on, which was Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Scorpions, Deep Purple, Van Halen… in terms of Hard Rock I've been listening to a lot of that stuff lately. We've also been trying to listen to the fans – certainly not wanting to sell ourselves out and do something we don't want to do, because we love getting heavy, we always have and we always will – but the fans have been asking for something a little edgier. Before we made 'No More Hell To Pay' that was a comment we received a lot from maybe one in every five or six people we spoke to at meet and greets and at shows, they would always ask if the next album would be heavier. So we really tried to listen to the fans because at the end of the day they're the ones who put you where you are and they're the ones that will take you where you're going, so you've got to listen."

Their current heaviness isn't a sudden change of direction, it's more a modern version of how they were in the early to mid-eighties when they started out as Roxx Regime. Going on to record the Metallic 'The Yellow And Black Attack' and 'Soldiers Under Command' as Stryper, unusually for a band of their ilk, with the same line-up of Michael, his brother Robert on drums, Timothy Gaines on bass and Oz Fox on guitar, the same line-up they still have today. Unfortunately the Christian message and the image probably put a lot of Metal fans off checking them out at the time. The guitarist agrees.

"Yeah, we *have* been overlooked I think. We've also had our lighter side as well. 'In God We Trust' was an album – I don't really count 'Against The Law' because it didn't do as well as any other Stryper album pre-break-up – but 'In God We Trust' was the end note of our successful period, it didn't sell as well as 'To Hell With The Devil', which was our biggest record, but 'In God We Trust' was our second most successful album. It was very polished, borderline Poppy in some ways, and then when you fast forward to when we got back together again in 2003 and released 'Reborn' and 'Murder By Pride', those weren't real heavy albums either. They had their edge to them and certain tracks that were heavy, but for the most part they were a bit more radio friendly and certainly not on the edgy side of Stryper, and the message we were getting from fans was that they wanted more tracks like 'Surrender' or 'Soldiers Under Command', the heavier side of Stryper. That's what we gave them on 'No More Hell To Pay', and even more so on 'Fallen'."

A lot of the songs have more than one guitar riff and guitar harmonies and vocal melodies that sound like Stryper, without copying what they've done before. So with Sweet writing pretty much everything, I ask if he finds it easy to come up with so many songs for Stryper and his other projects?

"It is!" he says flatly. "I don't say that with one hint of pride or ego whatsoever - I remain humble and thank God for continuing to help me with what I do – but the well's overflowing, it's not even close to being dry. I'm ADHD and I have OCD, I talk about those things a lot, I'm a very focussed person and when I start work on any project I give it 110%. I work well under pressure, so if a label calls me tomorrow and says "Hey, go start on an album right now!" I wouldn't say to them "I'm not ready!" I would say "OK!" and I would start on an album. It gets me excited to work under pressure and to actually have to come up with something, I like the challenge. It's just how I am, the way I'm made, songs are just literally always coming out of me. If you were driving with me to go get coffee, I'd probably be humming a song while we were having a conversation at some point, I'm just that way. I can't get songs out of my head, so when I pick up a guitar and start writing, it's just boom, boom, boom, the ideas start coming. What happens with me is that if I know I'm going to be working on an album in six months, I'll start humming guitar riff ideas into my iPhone, then I'll come home later and listen to all those and pick out what I really like, then write the riff and figure it out on the guitar. Once I have it figured out on the guitar I'll run with that, arrange the song and write the lyric and the melody."

So, how does Michael not repeat himself lyrically when all songs have the same basic theme?

"It's sometimes tricky," he begins without hesitation, "because our message is the same and always will be, and that's God's love, and God's mercy, and God's forgiveness, and to me that's what life is all about. It all comes from God and we're supposed to spread it around the human race, but of course we sometimes miss the mark with that. Our message has always been about love, and mercy, and forgiveness, and grace, and friendship, and taking care of our neighbours, that's pretty much it, and the sad thing is we get flak for that message. A lot of people say we're pussies or wimps because we sing about God, but I think quite the contrary actually. Metal and Hard Rock is all about the rebellion, and we're rebelling against the rebellion," he laughs at his own statement. "We're going against the tide completely, and that's the way it's always been for us. We're here for a purpose, we're not just here for the music and the Mesa-boogies and the Marshalls, we're here for more than that because in the end we're all going somewhere and all this that we have on earth will be gone, we remind people of that daily."

One seemingly odd song on the album is the cover of Sabbath's 'Masters Of Reality' track 'After Forever', which when you read the lyrics is probably closer to a Stryper song than to Black Sabbath.

"Well, we stayed pretty true to the original, in fact ridiculously true to the original, and the reason we chose it was we're all Sabbath fans, but there are some songs by

Sabbath that I like a lot more than others. Lyrically I think it's one of the best songs they've ever done, how many people know that Black Sabbath had written a song like that and recorded a song with a lyric like that? It could basically be a Stryper lyric when you get down to it, it's a Christian-themed lyric – "God is the answer, he's the only one. It's too late if you don't turn now!" – it's just about as bold as it gets from a Christian point of view, I was floored when I read the lyric. I'd always loved the song but never noticed the lyric that much, then when I read them I thought "Wow! This is the perfect song to cover for 'Fallen'"

Another oddity is the song 'Big Screen Lies', which is both a musical and lyrical departure for the band.

"Yeah, that's probably the most unusual track on the album," agrees its writer. "It's heavy in a really different way for us. It's got those modern elements to it, it's tuned down with that open dropped D sound to it and it doesn't have one of our usual in the stratosphere melodies, which is what people expect from Stryper, I kinda stay down. It's got a chant in the background vocal, a kind of crowd vocal rather than the pretty Stryper vocals you usually hear. Also lyrically it's a little different for us, it's not so much a message of love, it's more about what I believe to be a bit of a joke when Hollywood and Television portrays Christians as complete morons. All the Christians I know are normal people, they don't act like the Christians I see on Television or the big screen at all. I'm not sure where they're getting their information from or pulling these people from, but it's a lie in my opinion, it's not a fair portrayal of Christianity or Christians, and that's what the song's about. We're onto your lies, do something different, it's getting real old."

On the production side Michael is still tweaking his format, making 'Fallen' the best-sounding album he's produced thus far.

"We always try to stay within the realm of what we do and what we know how to do, and we don't try to venture too far outside of that because we have a format and system down that works, not just sonically speaking but financially speaking too," he explains. "We're able to do what we do for a relatively fair price, and not compromise the quality or cut any corners. The only thing we did differently this time was tracked everything to an old MCI analogue console like a lot of the old Maiden albums were tracked on, and by doing so we achieved a different type of low end that we haven't had in the last twelve years. We're just very happy with it, it's a bigger sounding album, it's got a little bit more meat and potatoes to it than 'No More Hell To Pay' had."

The band have toured a lot less than usual this year, leaving Sweet free to do other things, but as usual he's as brutally honest about their commitment to touring as he is about every other commitment in his life.

"We have to be able to afford to tour, we're not a band who can just jump in a van that pulls a trailer, getting paid $3000 a night and be away from our families for a month at a time," he says bluntly. "A lot of bands do that, but we won't, we're not willing to sacrifice our family time and our regular lives to go out and lose money. It's not that we're divas or anything, we've set a low-ball price and sometimes it's hard to get that in today's music world. We just tell people that this is our low price and this is our preferable price, and usually we get it, but sometimes we don't and that means we can't afford to go. We try to tour as much as we can, this year was an exception, we chose to take most of the year off, we've only done three or four shows this year. By the end of the year I'll have done about twenty-five solo acoustic shows myself, but next year we're going to hit the ground running, starting in April and all the way through to November, with possibly other dates sprinkled in between January and April, we'll be doing a lot in support of 'Fallen'."

Having taken up-and-coming teenage rock singer Gabbie Rae under his wing and going on record as saying he was co-writing and producing her debut album, my query on how it was going didn't exactly get the answer I was expecting.

"Well, I *was* really looking forward to doing that," he begins surprisingly, "we had everything worked out and were just waiting for the green light. I was actually calling studios and musicians and working out the details, we had all agreed that we were going to do that together. What happened was that they met up with Wendy Dio on the Monsters Of Rock Cruise and she wound up becoming Gabbie's manager and steered her towards other avenues to check out. I'm not even sure what she's doing at the moment, if it's a full album or an EP, but she's doing that with someone else. I was asked if I wanted to be part of it, but I'm a one man band and I don't do typically well with multiple producers. Everything I've done recently – Stryper, my solo album, Sweet & Lynch, and a couple of tracks on Veronica Freeman's V album – I've produced on my own. I have a particular way of doing things, the studio I work in and the engineer I work with, I know how to do that and I'm very comfortable with that. Quite frankly I don't have the time to up and move to LA to work with another producer, I've got a lot going on and it would be very difficult to pull off. We just decided to go our separate ways, and I'm really bummed about it. I had a clear vision for Gabbie and she and I were on the same page, we agreed on what she wanted to do, and I'll tell you this right now, it would have been a killer album! I'm not saying that her album isn't going to be great, but I do know that it would have blown people away, no doubt about it!"

So, is there room in his busy schedule for a second Sweet & Lynch record?

"Actually there is," he says enthusiastically. "We're talking about doing another album and at the moment it looks like we'll be doing it, we just need to work out finances. It's a really hard music world, budgets seem to be coming down and down. Labels aren't selling albums so they can't keep pumping out the same budgets as before, it's a decent budget but a little less than before so we just have to massage the process and work out how we're going to do it without compromising. Neither George nor I want to compromise the sound of the album, that's how you open the door for bad reviews real fast."

'Fallen' will be released by Frontiers Records on Oct 16th.

TAD MOROSE

After being off the scene for a decade, Sweden's Tad Morose returned to action in 2013 with the excellent 'Revenant' album. More straight ahead Metal than some of their earlier Progressive-tinged albums, it also marked the debut for new singer Ronny Hemlin (ex-Steel Attack), whose powerful and melodic voice is a perfect fit for the current band's more straight forward Metal approach. Tad Morose recently released the follow up to 'Revenant' and the equally excellent 'St. Demonius' is once again a solid metallic beast, with Hemlin's unmistakable roar at the centre of things. Guitarist (and sole original member) Christer 'Krunt' Andersson recently took time to talk to Wolf Gant about the new album, their recent European tour and future plans for Tad Morose.

The new album is a cracker! Are you happy with the reactions to it?

Oh, thank you, nice to hear that you like it. Yes we are happy. You never know what to expect but so far it has been very well received I think.

No albums since 2003 and then two come along in two years – do you feel the band is rejuvenated?

Yes, of course I do. The long period after 'Modus Vivendi' was a really tough period but somehow we managed to get our shit together and got back on track. It feels good that we now are picking up some lost momentum.

With such a long lay-off do you feel it benefitted the band, made you more focused when it came to recording new material?

Nah, I don't know really. In a way perhaps, but mostly it was not good for the band to be away for such a long period of time. But that is what happened and that's history. If we had kept at it back then perhaps we would have been long gone by now? You never know.

Following on from 'Revenant', it would appear that the band is in a rich vein of form – what do you attribute that to?

Well if you have been away as long as we have and you finally get going you got plenty of steam built up so it is just to release the brakes and go for it. We'll see how far it will take us. Perhaps we'll speed too much and crash? You never know. But we are not getting any younger so what is there to worry about? Nothing, if you ask me. So let's burn some rubber!

Ronny is clearly a big part of the band's new energy – are you thrilled to have found such a great singer and someone that gets the band so well?

Yes of course! We have known Ronny since way back so he is an old friend of ours. In fact, he was about to join Tad Morose when we parted ways with Urban. It didn't work out though since he was too busy with Steel Attack back then. He is a great singer and a great songwriter and just as crazy as the rest of us. He fits perfect in the band!

The two albums since the reunion have focused more on straight ahead Metal, yet when the band started out you were tagged as a Progressive Metal band – are you happy to have lost that tag?

I don't really care about that. To me we have always been Heavy Metal, that's it. Since everybody in the band gets their hands dirty when it comes to songwriting and recording, the sound of course changes depending on the current line-up. It is also, at least for us, about getting experienced and making up our minds. Back in the early days we thought it was cool if a song was very long and if we almost didn't manage to play it because it was impossible to remember all the parts, ha ha! After a while you kind of learn the hard way that that isn't really very cool at all, it just ruins the live show. There are also musicians that do that so much better any way. I mean, we still throw in some weird shit here and there in our songs just to…well, I don't know really… it's just our way of writing songs I guess.

Stand out tracks on the new record include 'Your Own Demise', 'Bow To The Reaper's Blade', 'The Shadow's Play' and the excellent 'Forlorn'. What were your favourites and which ones have you added to the live show?

My favourite was 'Where Ignorance Reigns' and 'Day of Reckoning'. But then again, I'm a guitar player and we usually like songs that are fun to play. Not necessarily the best songs perhaps, ha ha! On the tour we just did, we played 'Forlorn' and 'Your Own Demise'. We also played 'Where Ignorance Reigns' and 'Black Fire' on a few shows. It is always hard to pick the songs to play live when you have released eight albums. It doesn't get any easier either when you learn that so many people like different songs on your new album. Before the tour we talked about what songs to play live; of course we wanted to play the ones that were released as singles but we also looked thorough a whole bunch of reviews and talked to friends and so on and it was spread pretty much all over the place. So we'll see in the future what songs we will play live. It changes also of course depending on the length of the set we are playing. Sometimes you get like 30 minutes and sometimes an hour and a half, or more.

The album has a darker overall feel to the material, was that a conscious thing or were the songs just coming out that way?

It was natural. We never set out to try to do this or that. We just do it and it turns out the way it does. You get influenced by everything around you and it finds its way into the music one way or the other, at least for us. It also keeps it interesting while writing and recording because you never really know how it will end up.

You've just done a European tour, how did that go?

Well, I can say that the booking and promotion of this tour was handled by a company called Prog-Sphere, let's just leave at that. But we had a very good time and it was really nice to tour again. The few people who showed up seemed to really like it and we did our best every night.

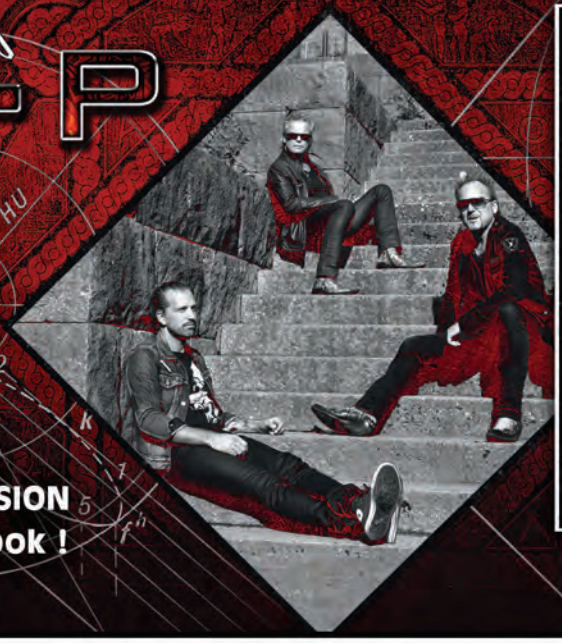
Are the band looking to get out on the road more these days? I know in the past you've stated that you have to fit everything in around day jobs etc.

Yes of course! But as you said, we also have to deal with our day jobs and so on but it is just a matter of trying to work around all that. It is not easy, but playing live is the fuel in our engine and this tour was to show that we still are here and hopefully it will lead to something. It was not the biggest and best tour ever but it is a start and we got to start somewhere.

Any plans to get Tad Morose to the UK – the home of Heavy Metal?

Yes there is! But due to the tour we just did I think we have to push those plans a bit since it ended up costing us way more than we initially got informed about. We will see what happens and with the right offer, we'll be there right away!

C·O·P



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chris norman

Here in his homeland, Chris Norman is best known as the former lead singer of 70s act Smokie, who racked up a string of hits before the vocalist decided to leave in order to forge ahead with a solo career. While his profile waned here, it's been very successful abroad, with the singer/song writer releasing a string of albums and enjoying hits in several European countries like Austria, Italy and particularly Germany. His latest album 'Crossover' sees him taking full control of his music, and James Gaden got in touch to hear about the reasons for that.

Chris Norman has been releasing albums since his debut solo record 'Rock Away Your Teardrops' was issued in 1982. With over 20 solo albums to his name, 'Crossover' follows the excellent 'There And Back', which was covered extensively in Fireworks #60. Unlike that album though, this one sees Norman writing every song alone, and playing the vast majority of the instruments himself.

"I'm always writing bits and pieces, jotting things down," he explains. "I recorded 'There And Back' in 2012 I think, so by the time last year came around, I was ready to do a new album because promoters wanted me to tour, particularly in Germany. I didn't want to tour without anything new out, so I started going through my ideas. I decided I wouldn't worry about whether it was Rock, or Pop or Country. Whatever I wrote that I liked, I would record. I made a list of what I had and made demos of them. Because of that, most of the stuff I'd played myself, on the demos. I do it on a little 8-track digital thing, which is really easy, you can't spend too much time on it that way. I found on the demos I had done, I really liked the way I'd played it and the way it sounded, so I just transferred it onto Pro-Tools and started adding things to it from there. As a result, I ended up playing the bass because I kept it from the demos, most of the guitar parts are mine, some of the keyboard stuff… it is all different styles, but I don't care. I've always liked different things, that's why I was a big Beatles fan, because they were diverse, they never did a record where you could say 'That was an album full of Rock songs' or whatever, it was always a mix of styles. I write a lot and in the past I've maybe thought 'Oh, that's a bit too Country' but here I thought as long as it was a good song and I liked it, I'd put it on. That's why I called it 'Crossover', because I'm crossing over many different styles."

Personally I would say Norman usually falls into the Pop-Rock bracket with his work, but previous albums have seen him dip his toes into the waters of Blues Rock, Country, stripped down acoustic tracks, ballads, Soul and Classic Rock. I question if there was ever a time when he was tempted to focus just one specific genre for a record.

"No, there's no set genre I'm forced to work in," the singer replies. "I did try, in the past, I did a song called 'Sweet Surrender' which was pure Blues-Rock. I recorded a whole album in that style… and I couldn't get a record deal with it! They were saying 'Yeah, we like it, but it's not what people expect from you…' As a result, that album never got released, the songs all ended up getting released eventually on other albums, but always in amongst other stuff. There's no point trying that, the audience that comes to see me are not into just one style, as long as the songs are catchy and good, they're happy with that, I don't think the genre is important."

Aware of how record company's opinions can stifle an artist, Norman didn't have this worry when he was putting together the eclectic collection of songs that make up 'Crossover'.

"To be honest with you, I had just been working with Sony/BMG," he confides, "who had put out a '40 Years Of Smokie' collection, marking our first hit which was in 1975. They put out this double CD and triple DVD set, which I was working with them on. I wrote a new song for it called '40 Years On' and I did that while I was in the middle of recording my own album. I liked it and put it on my album as a re-mixed bonus track. However, I didn't really think the record company did the job they could and should have done. They had everything to go on. They picked some tracks from the original Smokie, some tracks from the new Smokie, and I wasn't very happy with it or the promotion. They didn't ask any of us about doing any TV shows or anything, I'd have gladly done some TV for it, to help sell the album. They clearly spent a certain amount of money on it when you see the package but they didn't really follow it up. I'd suggested maybe recording a special for the DVD package, they could have interviewed each one of us, had clips of how we started, whatever, but they didn't want to do that. As I was recording my own album, one of the label guys heard some of my songs and asked what my plans were. I said I would be putting it out later on, but after seeing them do what I consider was not a particularly good job, I decided to put it out myself. I just got myself a distribution deal. Really, these days, the job a record company does, it's not worth bothering with, due to the money they spend. Basically you get a small percentage of the main thing, and all they are doing is hiring independent companies to do marketing, distribution, whatever. I might as well just hire those people myself. And that's what I did. As a result, I didn't have to ask anyone 'What do you think to this?' It was just 'That's the album, off you go,' and hired promoters for TV, radio and press people and sorting distribution deals for different territories and digital outlets like iTunes. It's all from my own label, Solo Sound Records.

> ***"So many huge acts that we know and love wouldn't have had amazing careers if the business back then had been run like it is now. There's no room for development, it's all money."***
>
> **Chris Norman**

"There aren't many record companies left now," he continues, "and the ones that are still out there are basically more like distributors. It's not like the old days, when a label was usually run by somebody who had been a musician themselves. When I was with RAK records, I was working with Mickie Most who produced a lot of hit records, but he had been a singer in a duo originally, having some success himself in the 50s and 60s. It was the same when I was at Decca, pretty much everybody was from a musical background so their heart and soul was in it. Nowadays, the people are more from a business background, accountants and lawyers, it's all about money. The fact is, most people who make records nowadays get one shot at it. They get an album deal if they're lucky, and if it doesn't make it... next! If that had been the case when I started, I'd never have gotten anywhere. Pink Floyd, their first album or two didn't really do much, there's loads of examples like that, so many huge acts that we know and love who wouldn't have had amazing careers if the business back then had been run like it is now. There's no room for development, it's all money. There's the odd one, like Adele, who have big success through a label, but not many. Even those from 'The X Factor' with all that TV exposure, they only really get one shot and if it's not successful, they end up having to find another way to make a living. I've talked to a lot of people and they are in the same frame of mind that they're better off doing it themselves. Sure, you have to use your own money to pay for everything, but you have to do that anyway. I wouldn't want to sign an artist deal where the label picks and chooses your material. You lose control of what you're doing, so you would have to go for a production deal. But even if you signed for that, they're only going to be hiring people you can hire yourself. It costs you more, but you have complete control over everything. And if it sells, you make more money anyway."

With forty years in the business, Norman clearly knows what he is doing and with technological advances, it's a lot cheaper and easier to make a record now than when he started. The new album hardly has any real drums at all, with Norman electing to use samples, but he's done such a masterful job, it wasn't until I read the credits that I realised there wasn't a drummer on the album!

"I know!" he laughs. "That was because I did my demo using standard drum samples and I was going to put real drums on the finished record. Then my drummer couldn't do it, so I

thought 'Well, these samples actually sound pretty good. If I tweak how they are played, it could work'. So I basically played the samples like a real drummer would. It wasn't like I was just using loops. The quality of the drum samples available now – it's not like back in the old days when you bought a drum machine or a LinnDrum. When they came out we all thought 'Ooh, they sound just like real drums!' You listen back now and they don't at all!" he chuckles. "The samples you can get now, and the various plugins can sound amazing. My engineer, Neil Ferguson, had these great plugins and samples and we used those to replace the basic beats on my demos. I usually play quite a bit on my records, with 'There And Back' I did use my whole band but I'm used to playing different parts when I make the demos. I enjoy it. I often put on overdubs and extra bits on all my album. I did bring in Rob Taggert, who used to be in my band, to add some keyboards and some string bits, and Geoff Carline did some guitar work alongside me, but yeah, most of it is me. I absolutely love playing bass! I said to Geoff, maybe we should start a new band and I could be the bass player! I really like being the front guy though, who does the singing."

The ballad 'Waiting' has been selected as the lead single, so I enquire if, thanks to the independent approach, that song was Norman's choice.

"Yeah, it was. When I was writing and recording it, I didn't think that would be a single, but when I played it to people, especially women, I've had really good feedback. Geoff said he played it to his wife and his daughter and they were both in tears! I spoke to my manager Ina and she said she loved it and thought it was very emotional. I thought maybe it could be a single, I want everyone to like it but I do aim for that kind of market. I like it too, my taste is obviously reflected with everything that's on the album, but if you'd asked me at the beginning, I'd have probably thought I'd have gone for 'Carry On' or something a bit more Rock, with more guitars in it."

Norman also made a video for the track, which can be seen on his newly revamped website.

" I used a company I found in Manchester, just from browsing on the internet," he explains. "I looked at some stuff they'd done and I thought they did a really good job. I'm going to be doing another one actually, I've got a Christmas single coming out so I'll be shooting a video for that with them. They came up with the idea to use drones to get those aerial shots and the images of people looking up at the sky. They have good ideas, it's good quality stuff, and they're not ridiculously expensive."

I was lucky enough to see Norman and his band showcase 'There And Back' at the Borderline and thoroughly enjoyed the performance. With so many great songs in his arsenal, it's a real shame he doesn't tour the UK much, concentrating mostly on his big markets like Germany.

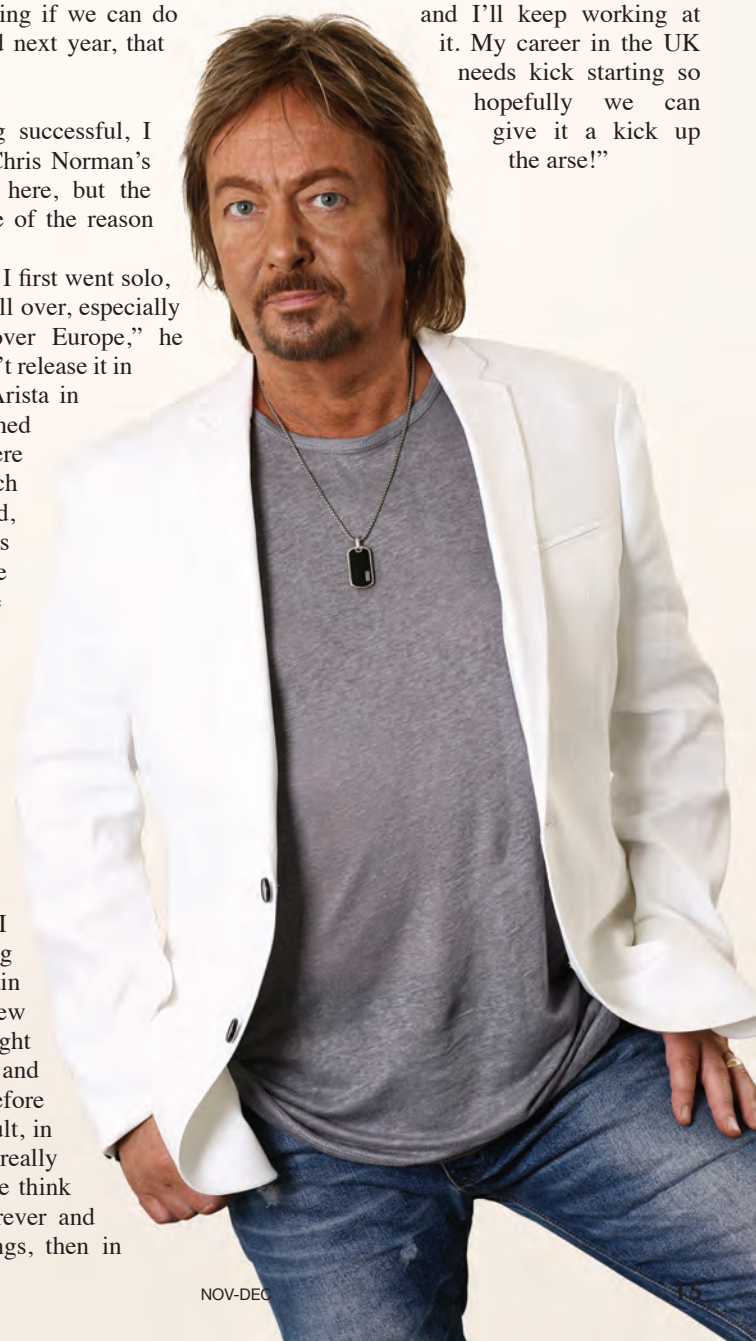
"The main reason I don't play here much is because my profile is not high enough," the vocalist states simply. "It's much higher abroad so it's a lot easier to play shows there. I did the showcase for 'There And Back' at The Borderline a couple of years back which you attended, and that sort of size club is what I'd be playing here. I really don't want to go the acoustic route where it's just me and one or two guys, because the sort of show that I do, as you've seen, is a full band show. There's six of us on stage, then there's the road crew, lights… I don't want to just turn up and use whatever is in-house, because in my experience the band can be as good as it gets, but if the sound engineer is crap then nobody will notice! I like to bring my own people so the production costs and expenses are quite high. In the UK, I really can't see it working out to be able to pay. For territories I'm trying to break, I will go in at a lower price than where I'm well known, so I do keep trying. One off shows are more expensive than doing ten day tours, because you can spread the cost out. If I could do loads of gigs in the UK, I'd do it like a shot. We are looking at seeing if we can do some shows in Ireland next year, that would be great."

With Smokie being successful, I found it baffling the Chris Norman's profile wasn't higher here, but the singer is keenly aware of the reason for that.

"It's because when I first went solo, my first hit was a hit all over, especially Germany, Italy, all over Europe," he reveals. "But they didn't release it in England. I was with Arista in Germany and they pushed for it to be released here but the English branch just weren't interested, they thought it was too European. Maybe it was. By the time I signed to Polydor, anything that was released in Europe, the UK Polydor always responded with 'Smokie? That's a bit old hat,' and never really bothered with my solo stuff. I've lived with that for years and for a while I didn't even try releasing stuff here, it was a pain in the arse. These last few years though, I've thought I should try again, try and build up England before it's too late. It's difficult, in some countries I am really well known and people think I've been doing it forever and have all these hit songs, then in England, where I'm from, some people just know me a bit and I have to acclimatise to that. I don't mind doing smaller gigs, building things up, I've done that before, it's just having the chance to do it. I'm much bigger in Germany than I am here. Mind you, so were Smokie. We had hits in England, about fourteen I think, but if we had a number five record here, it was number one in Germany, and the albums always did well there. We'd tour theatres here, and play arenas in Germany and Austria, places like that. When I went solo, there was more interest in me there as a result. I'm almost a household name in Germany. I was offered a one off slot opening for The Eagles there once, and I've broken into quite a few other European countries, but hardly at all here."

I ponder if Norman handling everything himself will be the key to winning back some of the lost ground.

"I hope so, I am trying, I'm looking at any opportunities that come up. Some promoters, and a lot of the media, aren't aware of anything I've done since Smokie so they've only got that to work with. I'm appreciative of this interview and I'll keep working at it. My career in the UK needs kick starting so hopefully we can give it a kick up the arse!"



joel hoekstra's 13

A guitarist who has gone from Broadway musicals, to playing in Scrap Metal with the likes of the Nelsons, Eric Martin, Jimi Jamison, etc. to Night Ranger and Trans Siberian Orchestra, Joel Hoekstra has now made the cut to become the 'new blonde' in Whitesnake. Not only that, but he has just released an album called 'Dying to Live' under the project name 'Joel Hoekstra's 13'. Sue Ashcroft had a lovely chat with Joel and found out some interesting facts about his ridiculous travel schedule, his love of Jeff Scott Soto and how things are going with his new band mates…

Although I know a lot about what you've been doing for the last few years, I don't know anything about your upbringing, your influences and how you got into the music business in the first place – tell me a bit about that.

My parents are classical musicians so I'd been playing cello and piano from a very young age, and like most little kids I just wanted to be a baseball player. I didn't really want to be much of a part of it, but then I heard AC/DC 'Back In Black' and from then on I wanted to be Angus Young, so that changed everything! I started playing guitar at the age of eleven and thankfully, because of that move, I've never really had to make a career choice in my life. I never really said to myself *this is what I'm going to do for a living*, I just think my passion for it carried me there. It's been really nice not to have any difficult career decisions to make.

You've worked with some of the most enormous names in the music business but one that I was quite surprised about and I'd love to know what exactly it was that you worked on, is Hugh Jackman?

Not much actually, I basically subbed for a friend of mine on the musical 'The Boy from Oz'. It just meant I was a pit musician for the bulk of it, then you would go up on stage and play a real small portion of the show with Hugh in person. He was great – a total professional. He knew my name the first day I came in and all that. He had a segment where he would stop the show and mess with the audience. He asked the guy what he wanted to sing and he said Bon Jovi, so I was the guy who had to play 'Dead or Alive' with Hugh and this guy singing it back and forth and having a good time. So not really much, but enough to put it in my bio. It was good fun for sure.

We are here to talk about your new album. First things first – why is it called 'Joel Hoekstra's 13'?

Well, I have three solo albums that I put out years ago that were basically instrumental guitar records – two being Rock Fusion and one being acoustic. People have been asking me for years "Why don't you put out a Rock album?", stuff that I'm more known for these days. Obviously I'm more known for the Hard Rock genre from playing with Night Ranger and now Whitesnake and Trans Siberian Orchestra, so this is finally that album. I just decided to give it a 'side project' name because it doesn't really sound like a guitar album to me, it doesn't really sounds like a solo album per se, so I thought it made more sense to give it a side project name. So, 'Joel Hoekstra's 13' is the project name and the album is called 'Dying to Live'.

I love the album but why, after doing three instrumental albums, did you decide to do songs? What led you in that direction?

I think it was a combination of people wanting it from me and also me really wanting to do it. I've just been really busy. The last seven years I've been on an unbelievable run playing gigs with Night Ranger, the Broadway show Rock of Ages and Trans Siberian Orchestra and now Whitesnake. For a while I was playing between 350 and 400 shows a year!

Well, for the last couple of years, almost every other post on your Facebook page was taken from an airplane window!

Yeah, well I was back and forth quite a bit with Night Ranger because they were only playing on the weekends and I would try and get right back to Rock of Ages the next day because I don't take employment for granted as a musician, believe me! I've also been playing on other people's albums too. I sort of ventured in, not knowing exactly how it was going to work. I brought a lot of riffs to Russell Allen. I was thinking we would be doing this as writing partners but Russell is so busy with Symphony X and Adrenaline Mob so I ended up doing the bulk of the writing as it turned out, doing all the lyrics and the melodies, which has been a blessing as it's helped me to connect to this album in a very deep sense. The line-up is stellar – I have two of the best singers in Rock today in Russell Allen and Jeff Scott Soto, having Vinny Appice on drums and Tony Franklin on bass, Derek Sherinian on keys – it's a total blessing man, I really thank those guys for lending their talents to these

songs and for helping me put out a good album.

You've known Jeff a long time but how did you decide who else was going to be on the album?

Well, the front half, I had Russell already singing lead but I always liked albums where they didn't have the lead singer doing the background vocals as well, I always like there being a second sound in there. I mean, I sing backgrounds fine but I just decided to call in a favour from Jeff because I had played on his albums and done some writing with him in the past, so I figured we're close enough and Jeff is a nice enough guy, has his ego in check, so he was kind enough to say he would sing backgrounds. Then, as it turned out, he was so great on there that I said "Hey, sing some lead on this dude!" So to have Russell and Jeff both on there is just amazing.

You've done Scrap Metal, musicals, TSO – are you still going to be able to do any of that now?

Well, I don't know. I'm just going to have to see how that plays out this year. Whitesnake has definitely got a lot of touring ahead and David has a couple of recording projects that he wants me to work on, so I'm just trying to make the best decisions moving forward all the time in terms of how to stay gainfully employed as a musician. I don't think I have to decide until the last available moment. I got to go down and play on the TSO album after my fifth tour with them which was amazing, but if I had to refrain from doing the winter tour with them this year then it would hopefully be just a one year break and then go back because I love being a part of Trans Siberian Orchestra for sure.

So how are you getting on with the Whitesnake guys? They are all great guys – Reb (Beach), Michael (Devin), Tommy (Aldridge)… and David is so funny, such a great sense of humour. He seems to surround himself with nice people.

It's been bliss out here man, I can't really speak about any of the past line-ups but it's been absolutely nothing but laughs on the bus, on stage and off. We're having a great time, everybody's doing their job and I know David has expressed that he feels like there's magic happening and it truly is magical the way that everything has fallen into place on this tour. I certainly am very honoured to be here.

I have to ask – what made you decide to leave Night Ranger?

It wasn't as much about wanting to leave Night Ranger as wanting to join Whitesnake! I love the Night Ranger guys – it's not like I was thinking "Boy, I can't wait to get out of here!" I just felt like the Whitesnake gig was a great opportunity for me to work with Rock royalty like David and this amazing line-up of musicians. It really is one of the greatest guitar gigs – the back catalogue is just stellar and on this tour to be able to pull from some of the Deep Purple stuff as well, it's really like Rock and Roll heaven.

Have you found it easier to settle into the band because on this tour you're playing songs that everybody knows so well, or has that made it more difficult?

I don't know. I felt like I had to be creative on 'The Purple Album' because we wanted a different slant on the songs. The original versions of all these songs had one guitar riff and Reb was going to have that covered, so in a lot of cases I had to come up with a second guitar part and obviously we did our own things with the solos, so I felt like I was flexing my creative muscles quite a bit on the record itself and it was a lot more like making an original album than people realised – it was for me at least. I don't think it made anything easier, I just treat it like a job – professionally and the fans deserve that kind of respect and time and I just make sure I bring my 'A' game to any opportunity I get.

With all this going on, what are your hopes for your solo album? Are you going to be able to do any live dates with that or is it just going to remain a project on album only?

I think I'm probably just going to release the album and see how it goes for now. I would love for the 'supply and demand' system to kick in enough that we could find the opportunity. I know the rest of the guys are being great about being part of the promotional end of things and I would certainly be open to doing live support for someone, but I think with an 'all star' lineup, so to speak, you're going to have to have the gig be pretty good out of the gate. We can't exactly start dragging everybody through the clubs but we'll see how it goes.

You're out on tour at the moment with the Dead Daisies?

Yeah, it's great – it's like having one big band. All the guys in the Dead Daisies are our peers, our friends and fantastic musicians. Richard Fortus is awesome on guitar – more chops than people realise. So tasteful and versatile and the rest of the guys – what a killer band. It's fun having them out on the road with us.

Well, as for your album, I've just had a thought – maybe you could do a couple of your songs with Jeff on the Monsters of Rock Cruise in February?

I think definitely! I mean, I'd love to get the whole band on there, I'm not going to give up on that but I think Jeff and I could probably do one or two of his songs in my acoustic set too or maybe we could do it full band with me getting up on guitar – I don't know.

Well, it's not like Jeff needs an excuse to get up on stage – you just know he's going to get up with Y&T!

Yeah, that's a given! I love Jeff and he's been so supportive. He's such a good friend. He really saved my ass on this album and made so much of it happen.

And it's turned out great. Joel is definitely at the top of his game whether it be Whitesnake, TSO or with his own material and even though he spends so much of his time above the clouds, he's definitely put himself on the map!

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CHANTEL McGREGOR

Bradford born singer/songwriter and guitarist Chantel McGregor has so far had a fairly short but ultimately very rewarding career, winning numerous awards within the Blues scene. Her first accolade of "Young Artist of the Year" coincided with the release of her critically acclaimed debut album 'Like No Other' in 2011, since then she has been recognised as "Best Female Vocalist" and "Guitarist Of The Year" on four other occasions. 2015 sees Chantel returning with her sophomore release 'Lose Control', showing a transition towards a more contemporary, darker and heavier direction with an album based around Southern Gothic Arts and Literature. Ant Heeks got in touch with Chantel to find out more.

As I'm a newcomer to your music, let's start with your background, when did you discover you had such a gift?

I still haven't discovered it! (laughs) I started playing when I was three because my dad used to play guitar and I always used to go up and de-tune his guitar. So they got me a little half-size when I was three, I started lessons when I was seven and it started from there.

What drove you to the conventional Blues style of your first album?

I think it's always been that sort of guitar-based music that I've been into, not necessarily Blues, but the first album's very varied, it's got some Pop stuff on there, Rock stuff, acoustic. It's just basically guitar-based music that I've always been into.

On the new album there seems to be many different influences and styles in there, so what do you actually listen to?

I listen to absolutely everything! When I was doing the album I was listening to a lot of things like Royal Blood, Porcupine Tree, mainly Rock but with Progressive influences.

So the new album 'Lose Control' has moved towards a darker and heavier sound.

Yes it definitely has I think, because I set out with this album wanting it to have a theme, which is the Southern Gothic Vampire swampy type of thing. I think as well because I've gotten older and grown up a little, this album is a lot deeper and more mature.

What influenced the style and where did the ideas come from?

I've always been into that kind of thing from films and Southern Gothic literature and artwork, it's always been an interest. I made the decision that if I was going to theme the album then I would do something that I'm really interested in and I know something about. Once I'd made the conscious decision that I was going to base the album on that subject, then it meant I could enjoy watching loads of films about that genre! I've always watched those type of films and television series like 'True Blood' and 'True Detective', but it became obsessive once I started writing the album because I was having to study it that much! If you're writing songs about it then you have to know about it and you really have to immerse yourself into that world. It was good fun. Literally every day I was researching what it's like in Louisiana and using Pinterest to study religion and thing to inspire lyrics. There are lots of different styles of music from that area too, so I was listening to that a lot and using ideas from that to see how those sort of songs work and try to incorporate them into my ideas.

The first album had a lovely photo of yourself on the cover, but 'Lose Control' is a complete contrast, what's the story behind it and all of the imagery used throughout the sleeve?

I really wanted it to be dark. The first album did have a nice picture, but it was a conscious decision that this one had to be something different. With it being such a dark album and the concept being so moody, it didn't feel right just to have a picture of me on it, I wanted something that fit that Gothic feel. A friend of mine did all the calligraphy for it, and I did all of the photography for the inside. I found a Voodoo doll and took a picture of it then messed around with it on Photoshop. I went through my lyrics to find the most poignant parts that would reflect the songs and the album as a whole and added those to it.

Have you any favourite songs on the album?

Probably 'Walk On Land' because I was listening to a lot of Progressive music and I set out to see if I could actually write a Prog song myself, then two days later I was like "Okay, I've finished the Prog song. See, I can write Prog!" That's the most technical song and the one I'm most proud of. I'm a big fan of Mostly Autumn and you can hear the similarities, they're good friends, I've done a lot of shows with them. 'Anaesthetize' is a very dark song, I was doing a lot of research into addiction and personal demons – not my own addictions though! – but seeing those things through other people's eyes was the theme behind it. It was difficult to write, not having those personal experiences. I wanted it to feel really personal with the nylon-string acoustic guitar, but there's a real contrast with the dark lyrics. 'Your Fever' was the last song written for the album, it was last summer during a ten-week period, I needed one more song but I'd kind of exhausted everything to do with the Southern Gothic theme so I didn't know what to write about. It was a really, really hot day so I just decided to write about being really hot! It was literally about me sitting in the garden in sweltering heat and not being able to get away from it, then I translated that into the Gothic theme so it fitted with the album and arranged it around being in the desert and not being able to escape.

You're no stranger to performing live, will you be able to blend the new material into the set alongside the older material even though there is a difference in style?

We've been playing some of these songs in the set already and they blend in really well. They're a lot heavier sounding in the live environment, but the first album sounds much heavier performed live. It sounds really polished on the album but we Rock it up for the live set, so it's all blending in really nicely.

Why did you decide to form your own independent Boutique label Tis Rock Music, instead of attempting to get signed by a Major label?

It's probably because I'm a control freak! I've always enjoyed being hands-on and doing things myself. Just to be able to do what you feel is right, even if at the end of the day that may not be what's right, but then it's only on your head it falls, if it all goes wrong!

Chantel McGregor's new album 'Lose Control' is out now. She tours the UK until mid-December. Album and tour date info: www.chantelmcgregor.com

Photo: Steve Howdle

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MICHAEL MONROE

Finnish rock 'n' roll punk Michael Monroe has survived an amazing career of excess, success and managing to escape death on several occasions. Having left two of the three well and truly in the past, Monroe is still achieving his goals with his new album 'Blackout States' set to hit the streets as we speak. Michael told me recently about the unintentional London theme which has perpetuated throughout the record.

I last interviewed you in 2011 for the Sensory Overdrive album. There was a song on that album called '78' which was all about how you still feel young inside, like you did in 1978. The first single from your new album 'Blackout States' is called 'Old Kings Road' and is again a nostalgic look at what was happening in London during the punk revolution. Did you write these songs from personal experience, because you seem to have a great affinity with London?

Oh yeah, I lived there from around '81/82 up until '85. Hanoi Rocks were based in London at that time. I moved to New York at the end of '85 for ten years after that. Inadvertently, there's a London theme on this album – we didn't plan a concept or anything, but it just happened.

I thought there seemed to be something of a theme as one of my other favourite tracks on there is 'Dead Hearts on Denmark Street' which is a fantastic song!

Cool – that's one of my favourites too!

How did you feel when you found out they were knocking Denmark Street down? Is that what inspired you to write the song?

Yeah, that's what the song is about. The whole block is being torn down and you don't even recognise the old neighbourhood anymore. It's very different from what it used to be. I couldn't believe they did that.

I know, it's just horrible around there now.

Yeah, I can't believe they've just knocked everything down around there and Denmark Street is going too. I don't know if you've seen the album cover yet, but The Astoria building is right there and the band are standing in front of it. 'Hammersmith Palais' on the 'Demolition 23' album mentions London, New York, Tokyo and Berlin in the chorus and that's what we used on the cover – the Chrysler Building in New York, The Astoria and the Post Office Tower for London and buildings from Tokyo and Berlin….

Ah yes, I see it now you mention it!

Rich Jones [one of the guitarists in the band, along with the charismatic Steve Conte] did the artwork for it – he even did the 'Horns and Halos' artwork. He had the idea, although I wanted for the back cover, something like The Damned 'Machine Gun Etiquette' album. Even though 'Blackout States' is about a state of mind rather than actual states, but somehow, when I think of the word 'states' I think of New York City and skyscrapers, so I said to Rich "how about some buildings like that?" and then we had the idea of putting all those buildings on there. 'Dead Hearts on Denmark Street' was about the Astoria really. There's a reference to Dee Dee Ramone in the lyrics which was written without the knowledge that we were going to have one of his songs [Under the Northern Lights] on the album. It was totally unintentional that we would have these references to London on there, it just happened. I think that's the magic of this band. It's like a higher force just makes everything fall into place.

During the ten years I lived in New York I was hanging out with Dee Dee a lot. He had left the Ramones and he had a bunch of new songs – I still have a couple of audio cassettes of his demos, but this song I never had a demo of. I just remember him playing it on an acoustic guitar and I still have the handwritten lyrics that he gave me back in the day. You can see some of the original lyric sheet under the lyrics of 'Under The Northern Lights' in the CD booklet as I sent them to Rich. He (Dee Dee) thought I should do this song because I'm from Finland and there's a line in the song that goes "and the great Finnish guy is frozen, like her ice cold eyes that say no" and he was talking about Finland, so I've saved this song for almost twenty years now and now it's time to be recorded. I thought of it for every album before, but it was never the right time. But now, on this album, we just reworked it a bit and condensed it (I didn't use all the lyrics he wrote) and here it is – a Dee Dee Ramone song that's never been released before.

Wow! How wonderful for you to be able to do that. Going back to the video for 'Old Kings Road', it warmed my heart to see that room with all the old punk posters on the wall – The Cramps and all the other bands I used to go and see in 1978/79. Is that what your bedroom looked like?

Ha, ha! Not exactly, but the place where we shot the video was in Brighton at the Pelirocco Hotel which has a different theme in each room. The room we used was called the Pretty Vacant room, but they had a rockabilly room, a Rough Trade room, a rasta room and a mod room. That one had a night table that was the front of a Vespa and

the back of it on the other side. The pillows that are like targets that we're using in the video were from that room. My room was the Betty Paige room. It was a really cool place. Our video director knew about the place and it was his idea for us to go and film there. It was funny because there's a Kings Road in Brighton and this hotel was right around the corner, so that was a funny coincidence, so most of it was filmed in Brighton, but then some was filmed in Soho on the streets.

I believe you almost fell out of the window at the end of the shoot too?

Well, I didn't almost fall, but I was trying to make it look like it. We were doing all kinds of things and I was like "let's see if anyone notices if I'm out the window" and I was hanging there and a guy goes "are you crazy or what?" and then the director says "it's ok, there's a ledge that he's standing on" but then he looks down and realises that there is no ledge! Ha, ha! I always like to do something to keep people on their toes.

I know only too well what you're like for climbing everywhere! Talking of which, last time I interviewed you, you had just got the copies of your book published. I asked you about the climbing thing and you told me about your childhood obsession with Tarzan and you showed me the photographs of when you were a young boy climbing on all sorts of stuff. I just wondered, has your book been released in English yet, because it was only available in Finnish at the time and I'd love to read it.

There's a Hanoi Rocks book that we're working on getting an English translation and release for which was written before my book, so we want to get that one out first before we concentrate on mine. We've got the Hanoi Rocks one translated and are in the middle of making a deal to have it released to the world in English, so that's the first step. That will be a great achievement first of all and hopefully, if that works out then the next mission I have is to have my own book translated and released. In the meantime, just to have one decent and truthful book about Hanoi Rocks is fantastic.

The new album 'Blackout States' is released early in October, just in time for your tour with Hardcore Superstar which is an awesome bill, but at the end of the dates you're going to be supporting Alice Cooper. Are you looking forward to that?

Absolutely! We love Alice and we've been working on this for years. I hope this will mean in the future that we could be going out doing even more dates with Alice. He's always been a great influence. Last time he played in Finland at the end of the summer, he invited me up again to sing 'School's Out' with him. I've done that every time he's played in Helsinki – I did 'Under My Wheels' once and 'School's Out' three times. It's a great honour, especially when Alice speaks so highly of me. I remember him saying to me "I like having you up there – you know how to work the stage". If Alice Cooper says that, then wow!

He's a lovely man. I remember the first time we met him at the Monsters of Rock show at Milton Keynes Bowl. We were taken in to his trailer to meet him. We'd been out in the sun all day and were really sunburned. My husband Phil walked in and the first thing he said after "hello" was "You know Phil, I play a lot of golf and I think you really need to get some aloe vera on that nose! We're out on the golf course all day and I know more than most, you need to look after your skin!"

Ha, ha! That's so Alice! I love that. He's such a great guy.

And where do you go after your UK tour?

We're doing some dates in Finland from around the end of November until mid December, but then I think we have some dates in the States in February.

Ah yes, you're doing the Monsters of Rock Cruise. We go every year – you'll have a blast!

Yeah, we're looking forward to it.

Michael and the band will be on tour in the UK with Alice Cooper. Trust me – you don't want to miss it.

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Interview by
Julia Braun

When I heard the very first chords of 21Octayne back in 2013, way before their debut 'Into The Open' finally was released last year, I was taken by the ingenuity and musical diversity played by a bunch of highly skilled and extraordinarily creative people. Marco Wriedt, Hagen Grohe, Alex Landenburg and Andrew Lauer have brought back my belief that even nowadays, when music is more of a consumer good like a Big Mac, rather than a brilliant three-course-meal, everything's possible.

I caught up with Marco Wreidt to discuss memories, changes and their new release, '2.0'…

Pretty much everything changed for 21Octayne after you found good management and a label you guys could trust. Would you give us a bit of a summary of these past eighteen months?

Well yes, 2014 was an exceptional year, a game changer in so many ways. It started with the Hollywood listening session in January, followed by London and Paris. Then we signed with AFM/Soulfood. The amount of energy was extraordinary. Then in May, the album got released. People loved 'Into The Open', I'm still beyond proud of the record. We did the release show in Hamburg – everybody was there: fans, friends, family, the whole AFM-Records team. It was truly a magical night for all of us and I will never forget the party afterwards. Then we signed with Extratours Booking. This was also the time when we started to work on '2.0'; August 2014. Another milestone was the tour with Uriah Heep. These guys are legends and you will never meet nicer people than them. This was a great tour and we gained many more fans! We also worked constantly on the new album during that tour. 2014 was incredible, a real team effort.

Now you're back with a vengeance with your second release '2.0'. I'm curious to hear about the writing and recording process – especially as you certainly didn't have anywhere near as much time as you had to make your debut.

Right from the beginning Alex and I wanted to release '2.0' by end of 2015. When 'Into The Open' was released in May 2014, we said to each other, "Alright, let's start working on the second one immediately." We knew what we wanted. We didn't want to copy 'Into The Open', we wanted to move on and progress. We started the song-writing in August 2014. I was already working on songs that later became 'When You Go', 'Devil In Disguise' and 'Tale Of A Broken Child'; the music was written over four weekends. We've just had so many ideas and everybody was really creative; 'Take Me Away', for example, came out of nowhere. All of a sudden it was just there – "I have that chorus idea…", "Oh cool, I have this bridge..". "Okay and what about this in the middle section?" – You listen to this particular song now and you can really feel these different elements. This song for me is a perfect example what 21Octayne is all about. I had been working on 'Tale Of A Broken Child' in 2013 already. I played around with the main riff for quite some time and being a Progressive Rock fan I wanted to have a longer song on the second record. So there it was. It felt just right. I presented the complete song to the other guys and everybody was really keen about it. Then I said, "I have this very calm guitar piece for another ballad" and Alex suggested to start the song like that. Great idea! Hagen did an incredible job on the lyrics, I think! Fits like a glove to the music. We also worked on the album during the Uriah Heep tour. Hagen finished the lyrics in January and we started recording the album in February. Drums, bass and vocals were recorded in our own studio in south west Germany. Guitars were recorded in a studio close to Cologne.

When I heard your second album would be titled '2.0', I thought… "that's a bit... lame...". Why did you chose that title?

This album is like a 21Octayne update and think about all the classic albums like 'Queen II', 'Van Halen II', 'Led Zeppelin II'. We wanted to put the classic and current together so that's '2.0'. It also shows our two different musical faces, which the album cover captures perfectly. Our catchy Melodic Rock style on one hand and on the other, the more Progressive music.

I think you've adapted a more "radio-friendly" style, with a lot of the songs being more predictable. The complex structures, rough edges, experiments and peaks in the final mix are mostly missing compared to 'Into The Open'. Only the last song 'Tale Of A Broken Child' is an absolute exception here, not just regarding the complexity but also the length. Where did this come from, what are you trying to achieve with this?

I think '2.0' is even more diverse than 'Into The Open'. That's what we wanted to do, a very mainstream Rock song like 'When You Go' which is three minutes thirty long and on the other hand a ten minute song like 'Tale Of A Broken Child'. The most Progressive song on the album, I think, is 'Take Me Away' which is linked to 'Tale Of A Broken Child'. Both songs carry two musical themes – that's quite Progressive. It's like an Easter egg. I won't tell which melodies those are but yeah, those two are linked together. So, there is a little concept in there. Then you have some American up-tempo songs like 'The Circle' or 'Love's Just A Heartbreak Away' and 'Lost'. 'Fly With Me' is a heavy, more Progressive one with different time signatures. So yeah, I think this album has even more variety than 'Into The Open'. It's a nice blend of American straight-forward-Rock and a more European, Progressive approach.

Why did you decide to go separate ways from your former bass-player Andrew Lauer after the recordings for '2.0'? Your childhood-friend Ben Pyko will be his replacement for the upcoming shows, will he join as a permanent member of the band, or have other plans been made?

We had to let him go. He wasn't showing the right attitude you need to have at this point of the band's career. However he did a fantastic performance on the album. I have known Ben for 25 years. It's funny when we were standing on stage again after so many years but it was very cool. He is a talented musician and a great guy! He will not join the band as a full member though, as right now we want to continue as a trio. I'm sure someday there's gonna be a fourth permanent member in the band again but there is no reason to force anything now.

What exactly is the idea behind the cover artwork?

We found a great German artist who perfectly understood the vision behind '2.0'. We're no big fans of the average Metal fantasy cover so again we wanted to go for a different kind of approach. I think the cover is quite avant-garde and interesting… unconventional even. I really like it. Two different sides of a face, like our music.

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THE WINERY DOGS

Interview with Richie Kotzen by Mónica Castedo-López

After an extremely successful debut album in 2013, Richie Kotzen, Billy Sheehan and Mike Portnoy – the three titans collectively known as The Winery Dogs – unleash 'Hot Streak'. This second studio release picks up from where their self-titled album left off, yet broadens its musical spectrum incorporating, alongside their traditional Rock vibes, slower and more commercial tracks. Not only is the trio's new release an excellent reason for singer and guitarist Kotzen to be understandably thrilled, he's also just unveiled his first ever professionally shot DVD with his solo band. Without further ado, Mr Richie Kotzen…

I guess you are really excited about this new release. How do you feel about it and how did you write for it?

We wrote for it kind of similar to the first record, the biggest difference is that the on first record I brought in quite a few songs that I had already written and we just recorded them. On this record I didn't do that, kind of on purpose. I figured if I write something on my own I'll just keep it for myself, as a Winery Dogs song should come from the three of us, at least on the music. So basically we got together and just came up with a bunch of musical ideas like little riffs, and we arranged them instrumentally and recorded them and then I spent a couple of months living with them and eventually I wrote melodies and lyrics and pretty much turned them into songs. We did do that on the first record, but just half of it. This time we did that with the entire record. I think somehow, probably because this is my mood, I wrote better lyrics this time and in some ways I feel like we might have made a stronger record. There's certain chances that we took as well with the treatment of the songs and so the record has a broader scope stylistically. The last record was pretty much a straight Rock record with the exception of the song 'Regret'. This one took a few chances stylistically. I always like that because it shows a little bit of growth.

Was that a conscious effort to try different styles or did it just happen naturally?

I think it just happened naturally. We never really talked about anything stylistically and I've always been the kind of person that I write what I write and if I like it, cool, and if I don't, I don't release it.

The debut album was so well received. Were you nervous about recording the follow-up?

I wouldn't say I was nervous but I know that I wasn't ready. I was trying to stall it as much as I could. Our manager was putting pressure on me to start the next record and I didn't really want to because I was pretty burned out from the first album cycle, and secondly after that I put out two records of my own: the compilation 'The Essential Collection' and the studio album 'Cannibals'. I did a bunch of touring on that with my band as well: we went to Europe, South America and the States. I was really working a lot, so the thought of starting another cycle of anything was not something I wanted to do. So I agreed to at least get together in January and tie things in, and we did. Then I sat for a while and it wasn't until April when we played on a cruise that I started listening to the stuff and started getting ideas. Once I started getting new ideas, I started to get really excited to record them. So we booked studio time around June and we started recording. When we recorded, the guys spent about ten days doing bass and drums and then I'd take over and spend as much time as I needed finishing the record: guitars, vocals, electric piano, acoustic piano… it's quite a bit of work.

'Oblivion' is such a fantastic way to start the album!

Yes, I think that that song is a good opener for the record. It ties in to where we left off. We wrote that song during the first album cycle on one of the breaks we were together and we wrote that and did a little demo of it and started playing it live. There's some other stuff on the record that I love. I love the song 'Hot Streak', I love 'Ghost Town' and we have a ballad there again called 'Fire' that really came out cool. I think it's a cool record.

What are the band's touring plans?

The US tour is posted and starts in October for 4-5 weeks. Then we're looking to do Europe in February.

You've now played together for

over 100 shows so by now you pretty much must know what to expect from each other when on stage. Is that chemistry that you develop further and further and that you can still improvise with?

The band is an interesting animal. There's a certain show element to the Winery Dogs. By the way, the same day as the Winery Dogs album comes out I'm releasing my first ever professionally shot live DVD, a properly recorded DVD that I did with my solo band. It was at the end of our touring so we were pretty much at our best. What you'll notice with that band is that we really improvise for real. We really listen to each other and play off each other. With the WD it's definitely more of a show element, not to say that we don't listen but it's a visual element to the WD: Mike throwing his sticks in the air and Billy doing all kind of crazy things to the bass. I always joke and say in basketball terms the Winery Dogs is like watching an NBA All Star game, where people are dunking and flying through the air and scoring 130 points but no one is playing defense; and when I do my trio is almost like watching the Chicago Bulls back in the Jordan era. It's a different animal but both are fun.

Your first show of this tour is only in three weeks' time so I'm guessing you've already started rehearsing and you know which songs the new album you're playing?

Well, I don't know yet because, believe it or not, we didn't start rehearsing yet. We're going to get together three days before we go out and we'll figure it out. It will be fine, we're playing our music so it shouldn't be that hard to get it right. I'm looking forward to getting out and playing live. Then, at the end of this album cycle I'll take a step back and maybe get some time off and see what I feel like doing and not rush into another cycle of anything. But at the moment, I'm pretty much looking forward to getting this music out there and getting heard.

To conclude, please tell us about your solo live DVD.

It's called ''Richie Kotzen Live', although I think it has a different name in Japan. It was recorded in Japan at a place called Blitz and what I love about it is that it's the first real DVD that I've done where I'm recorded properly, both the visual and the audio. Years ago I released 'Bootlegged In Brazil' and although it was a great show, it was a lower quality. So this one in Japan they did a great job. It's me and my rhythm section Dylan Wilson and Mike Bennett and I love it because it's the first time someone actually captures what we do and we played well. A lot of times when you get these opportunities to record and people have cameras and you just have a bad night. But this one turned out to be a really good and accurate representation of what we do. There are a lot of spontaneous moments on here. It's going to be available online order only and you will see a link on my Facebook and Twitter pages. If you're interested in what I do with my solo band and you haven't seen us, definitely check it out, or if you have seen us live get it anyway because it's a really good representation of what we do. I'm really happy to finally have this DVD out.

You can get The Winery Dogs 'Hot Streak' album from the usual outlets and order Richie Kotzen's 'Live' DVD at:
http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/richiekotzen14

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BILLY SHERWOOD

Multi-instrumentalist Billy Sherwood has a new concept album, 'Citizen', out on Frontiers Records. Az Chaudhry caught up with Billy to discuss the release of the album, his emotional return to Prog legends Yes and the extremely busy year that he has coming up.

Can you share the idea behind the new album and how you came up with the whole concept?

It's the story of a lost soul reincarnated into various historic periods of time.... this concept was drawn from the notion that General George S Patton believed he was reincarnated on various battlefields over time. I found this interesting and so wanted to take that idea further.

How did you become involved with Frontiers?

I had been working with them in a production capacity by virtue of mixing the last studio Yes record, 'Heaven and Earth' and after that mixing two of the Yes live DVDs. Frontiers was very happy with my work and also knew of my artistic side, solo CD's, bands etc... and so approached me to create the project "CITIZEN".

You sang, played guitar, bass, drums and keyboards on the album. How difficult was it to pull all this off and how did you continually push yourself?

I enjoy playing a lot of instruments, it comes easy to me after many, many years of playing. I push myself very easily, I'm a bit of a workaholic and love making music. I own my own studio where I've been making records for the last few decades, if I get an idea I have a full blown studio at my fingertips. This makes it very conducive to create.

How did you manage to get so many special guests to appear on the album: Steve Hackett, Rick Wakeman, Steve Morse and Alan Parsons to name but a few?

I have great relations with a lot of amazing musicians, this has come from years of doing various projects and inviting various musicians/singers on board. They trust that their overdubs will be treated with the utmost in care and respect… after many years doing what I do it seems I have had the honour to work with many of my friends and heroes. It's a blessing and I make sure to take care with the music so everyone involved is well represented.

Chris Squire was my all-time favourite bass player and I know he was a very close friend of yours. How difficult was it for you knowing that his performance on title track 'The Citizen' was his final recorded work?

Very hard indeed... I loved Chris like a brother and it was a really difficult thing to deal with his passing... I am honoured to have what is his last ever recording and even more so with the fact that he asked me to take his spot within Yes. I do not take that responsibility lightly at all, and so worked very hard to make the sounds and get the playing and singing in order for the tour, which we just finished.

Being such a busy musician and producer was it a difficult decision rejoining Yes?

Not at all. Chris asked me to do it, that was all I needed to say Yes.

How have you found it on stage playing Chris' parts and what has the fan reaction been on the co-headlining tour with Toto?

I find playing the Yes music to be in a word, surreal, based on the journey that lead me to the position, knowing Chris the way I did, knowing how much I looked up to him when I was a young guy starting out... it's just been surreal. Doing that tour with Toto on the same bill was full circle for me. Without those guys kick starting my career in the early 80s I may not have even been doing what I do now. It really made the touring cycle unique to have them out there, it was a source of comfort for me, during what was at times very difficult, emotionally speaking. The fans have been so supportive and loving towards the situation, it's been very uplifting to know the true Yes fans are standing with the band during this difficult transition.

Which Yes song did you enjoy playing most on the recent tour and why? Which Yes song would you like to perform in the future?

I love playing 'America', there is so much to it... it's a blast to play. I would personally love to play 'Gates Of Delirium'.

My introduction to your recorded work was on the awesome World Trade debut album, do you have any future plans to record with them? We are making a new record as we speak, with the original line up. After so many years it's fun to re-engage that band.

You formed Circa in 2007 with ex Yes member Tony Kaye. Is the band on hiatus now? We just finished a new record called 'Silent Resolve' which will be released on Frontiers sometime next year, Circa is alive and well, the new record is killer... very Proggy indeed.

I met both you and Bobby Kimball after a YoSo gig in the U.K. a few years back and you discussed recording a second album. What are the chances of that happening? Not likely at all, I have my hands full and then some. Between Yes, Citizen, Circa, World Trade and my solo stuff, where I play everything by myself, there's enough going on.

You've been involved in the music industry for almost 30 years. What changes have you seen during this time?

Analog to digital... vinyl to itunes downloads, music played by musicians to music sampled and reprocessed by whatever they call those people who do that! A lot has changed, that said I still believe music lovers want to hear productions that move them emotionally and that's what drives me to keep making music.

What do you think of the current musical climate and which artists do you listen to?

I like a lot of different things. I go from old school Mahavishnu Orchestra to Britney Spears, I'm intrigued by anything that is well produced/recorded/mixed etc...

Finally, what would you say has been the highlight of your career so far?

It goes without saying that joining Yes – several times now (laughs) – is a highlight, this was a band I worshipped as a 12 year old kid, got the pleasure to meet in person as a 20 year old kid and eventually got to produce, record, mix, join... It was and continues to be a highlight. That said, the additional highlight would have to be making a record with William Shatner, who I am honoured to call my friend. We created 'Ponder The Mystery' together, co-writing and creating the record. This was very special for me.

With the album 'State Of Rock', three veterans of the Melodic Rock scene start a new chapter of their careers under the moniker of C.O.P. Peter Sundell, one of the three musketeers, is the one to tell Alexandra Mrozowska the story of band's foundation, the circumstances of making their first record and their hopes for the future…

What prompted the idea of founding C.O.P and what were the circumstances of the band's foundation?

My brother Christian and I have been in different bands together since 1978; groups like Wulcan and Promotion that later on became Grand Illusion…. The first time we met Ola af Trampe, was when Grand Illusion were looking for a guitarist for the Gods Of AOR gig around 2003. Ola got the gig and we all clicked very well both on stage and in private, so he became a full part of the band then. We also have a side project called the Hydra Project, playing covers, so we know each other well. Christian bought a home studio in 2012 and started to write songs again. I was there laying vocals down on a demo for the song 'Loner', which ended up as the first song on 'State Of Rock'. We both thought that this could actually be something worth continuing with, and when we contacted Ola, who is both a good friend and a very skilled and talented guitarist, he really wanted to be part of it. Hence, C.O.P was formed; Christian, Ola, Peter, equals C.O.P.

Is C.O.P a one-off project only?

No, it's definitely more than a one-off project. We've already started working on our next album. This is very much a group and we're very excited about the future.

While forming a new band with two musicians known from the previous line-ups of Grand Illusion, weren't you a tad afraid the listeners will expect C.O.P to pick up where the previous band left off?

You'll always be compared to what you've done before and there's nothing you can do about that. Our vision was to make straightforward, melodic songs with a solid base, driven guitars, keyboards, all in a good mix and with a lot of room for the vocals.

Is your prior experience then reflected in the way C.O.P sounds? Or is it more of a new chapter with no connection to the past, so to speak?

We are all influenced by music from the eighties and I think everyone will hear it when they listen to the album, so experience definitely counts for a lot. Hopefully we added a little modern touch to it as well, but as always the melodies in the songs are most important.

Having worked with both Christian and Ola in the past, and with Christian being your brother, do you consider yourself a band leader who has the last word in band-related issues? Or is it more about democracy?

Definitely a democracy. Both Christian and Ola are very talented musicians, songwriters and arrangers; we have worked together for a long time and have total respect for each other. So honestly there is no band leader here.

With C.O.P being a three-piece band, do you think that brings any sort of limitations? Do you plan to add some other members to the line-up, for the purpose of live shows?

Well, there's certainly no limitations at all in the studio, I can tell you, but we will add a keyboard player and a bass player when we play live. The search for these has already begun, because we really want to play live very soon.

Now onto your first CD 'State Of Rock'. How did the song writing and recording process for this album look? Was it any different than before?

Yes, a little different – I'll come on to that in a moment. Christian had written most of the songs and recorded a demo for each one when Ola and I got involved. We all sat down and listened to each song, then came the decision to give each song a go, or deny it… After that process came the recording of all the instruments and then the vocals. Where it was different to previous recordings we've worked on, was that this time every single song was worked on right up to the time it was finished.

What bands were you inspired by while making this particular album and was it more about your lifelong inspirations, or perhaps discovering new ones?

I think it's more of a lifelong inspiration. As I said before, we have played in the style of and listened to a lot of the music from the eighties, so I think it's much more that than finding new inspiration. If I can, I should mention some bands too; Streets, Wrabit, MSG…

It was Ola of course who mixed and produced the album. Was it a better solution to do it that way than to collaborate with someone from the outside?

I actually don't worry about that. I think it's quite natural to do this when you want to have control of the production in the way we wanted. Ola has a very good studio and we live in the same town, so it's a very good position to be in. We sent it to Los Angeles, to Frank Rosato, for mastering, and it was really interesting to get his feedback on the music as well.

The album has gained some rave reviews so far, with one of its many assets pointed out being your vocals and performance. Did you ever take singing lessons or trained your voice professionally?

No, I have never actually taken singing lessons. The range and the "shape" has developed over time. I started singing when I was 6 years old and got my first record deal when I was 9 years old, so I've been singing all my life. To keep my voice in shape, I practise a lot in my car when I'm driving.

What do you plan for promoting 'State Of Rock'? A video, or maybe some live gigs?

We're looking primarily for live gigs at the moment. We really want to get out there and play. It's been so important to us all in the past and we can't wait to do it again because the songs will sound brilliant live. As of today we have no plans for a video, though.

Are there any other projects you're committed to personally at the moment?

Well, we've already started working on the next C.O.P album, so I'm very busy with our own material right now. But I'm involved in another band as well, called Starlight Brigade and a new record for that will be released soon.

OPERATION: mindcrime

Interview with GEOFF TATE by CARL BUXTON

Operation:Mindcrime is a new band put together by former Queensryche vocalist Geoff Tate and is almost a reinvention of his former band. The sonic tapestries he paints are very similar to primetime era Queensryche and with the debut album by this band being the first part of a trilogy, the conceptual nature of the compositions mirror that of the album the band derives its name from. Very often misunderstood and sometimes vilified in the press and by fans, Geoff Tate is indeed a very complex character. However, whatever the rights and wrongs of the unsavoury public spat between the former Queensryche cohorts, Fireworks found Geoff to be a very agreeable and genial individual… this is some of what was talked about including the thirty-seven ideas he had translated into three album parts.

Yes, it's a trilogy. There's one story in it and it takes three albums to cover the story. The first album came out in September and I'm very excited about it. This is my first album signed to Frontiers so we're getting a game-plan as to how we want to present the album and they like a long lead time for setting everything up, so I'm cool with that. Everybody I've been hearing, before I knew the record company, said they had very good experiences with working with them. My experience with working with them has been very good as well.

I notice that your long-time collaborators, and former Myth bandmates, Randy Gane and Kelly Gray are still with you but Rudy and Robert Sarzo are no longer with you. What happened with them?

Well, nothing really happened. They're kind of off doing different things right now. I put the group together to tour. One of the things that we all really wanted to do was to keep everything very open-ended so everybody had their freedom to pursue different projects and so it's really worked out well. We have some really great players that are with us live that challenge them to change things up and it kind of gives the music a different kind of flavour I think. They're not really songwriters, so they don't participate in the song-writing of albums and things like that, so if their schedules allow as we're touring, they might sit in for a length of time, but we're not sure how it's gonna work yet and I don't think we're gonna tour until some time in the New Year.

Really? That's quite a long time to wait. I guess you have to be really sure you have everything in place before you commit.

Yeah, something like that. I kind of like to have everything covered. But honestly I'm in the studio still working on the second and the third album right now. I guess I'm about 80% done with the second record and will try to wrap everything up by October. That's my plan. All three done and recorded by October. But the second and third album won't be released until next year and the year after that.

With all the ideas – I think there were thirty-seven that needed representation – and because it's such a complicated and involving storyline, are you putting all the plots and ideas in order or will people need all three albums to work out the storyline?

Yeah, the story will be revealed over three records. It's kind of like reading a book. You read certain chapters, in chronological order of course, and it tells you a story. It's the same with the music.

With regards to all the other musicians, bassist John Moyer of Disturbed, ex-Whitesnake and Billy Idol drummer Brian Tichy and guitarist Scott Moughton, what can you tell me about these guys involvement?

Brian's played with me before on the last tour – he sat in for Simon Wright for quite a few months and also Scott Mercado is a drummer from Seattle who used to play with Candlebox, a very popular band. Scott and I are old friends, we go way back. For instance he played on the record as well as touring with me last year. Scott Moughton is a guitar player and a song-writer whom I've known for a few years and he played on my first solo album. Simon Wright played on quite a few tracks on the album as well, and you probably know who he is, and I think that's it besides Kelly and Randy.

And you've got some guest players like Dave Ellefson from Megadeth?

That's right. Dave co-wrote a song on the first record with me and played bass on it as well.

And Mark Daly?

Mark Daly is an Irish singer from a band called The Voodoos and he co-wrote some tracks on all three records with me and sang a lead vocal on one of the tracks on the first album ('Life Or Death' from 'The Key')

With the second and the third albums Geoff, are there going to be other musicians and artists that you haven't revealed yet collaborating with you, such as Pamela Moore for example?

Yeah, there will be, but I can't really reveal that yet.

One of the things that really hits me, in the couple of spins I've afforded it, is how very similar Kelly Gray's guitar playing is to Chris de Garmo, and there is very much an 'Operation:Mindcrime'/'Empire' feel to the songs, particularly 'Burn' for example. Was that deliberate or has it come organically from Kelly?

I think it's just something that's kind of evolved. Kelly and Chris wrote together and have played in bands together over the years and all of us have been inspired by a lot of the same kind of music so yeah, I think that just kind of happens naturally.

One of the other things you've done, which I think is quite impressive, is the light and shade with the music. Your music has never been one dimensional, obviously, but you always introduce different flavours, certainly with your solo albums where you've almost gone left-field for some people – the sax for example on 'The Fall'. The way the album works is one gets an instant feel for the album from the get-go – it slows down and then it builds again – the interesting spoken word that reveals key parts of the storyline. On 'Burn' for example "…give me gasoline I'll burn everything", that for me is kind of interesting because one is questioning what does it actually mean? Burn the buildings? Burn technology?

The story is roughly about a guy that discovers – well, he invents it really – a program that is operated by a computer and it gives insight into reality, sort of a new way of interfacing to the reality that we built. And it's a monumental discovery and he is torn as to what to do with this discovery. Should he give it to the world because it's going to change everything? Or should he sell it for profit? And burn everything down and start over. And it's a question that he struggles with throughout the first record.

The story around whether the code should be given to the world or sold for profit obviously follows on from 'Burn' on 'Re-Inventing The Future' and there's a line in that song towards the end; "…can you imagine the future? Then you're already there" that I found very interesting.

Yeah, that has to do with quantum psychics and the theory which is really interesting to me too. We've invented this thing called time, except it's a man-made invention and was invented by people thousands and thousands of years ago, primitive people really by our standards today, and we've taken that concept and built everything around it and so what if it's all perception? Anybody can change that perception in a blink of an eye just by looking at things differently, so that is a real basic premise within the album, obviously coming back to here and there, bringing that idea back and forth.

Do you find with this project that you have more freedom now than when you were in Queensryche in regards to your writing, how you plan the concepts and how you take your music forward?

Oh definitely, definitely more freedom, yeah. It's really my total decision now, everything. If there's something that isn't working for me, we write something different, I don't have to compromise and try to work with something I'm not really excited about, which in the past was something you just have to deal with when you're in a band situation – there's so much compromise to make it work. So yeah, it's a lot more satisfying for me this kind of set-up that I have now where the decision making is all on my shoulders. I enjoy that. It does get a little tedious sometimes (laughs) because you have to make decisions on everything, you know. Sometimes the decisions take longer to make.

CATS IN SPACE

Cats In Space is former Moritz singer, songwriter and guitarist Greg Hart's new band. The album, called 'Too Many Gods', features legendary Sweet guitarist Andy Scott, as well as Mick Wilson of 10cc. With the influences of such legends as Queen, ELO, 10cc and Cheap Trick, any fan of the Melodic Rock of the seventies is in for a real treat. Ray Paul had a chance to chat with Greg about this release, cats, religion, musical influences and the future plans of the band Cats In Space.

What made you leave Moritz and form Cats In Space, Greg?

That was a very tough decision, but it became apparent during the writing process for Moritz's follow up to 'SOS' that my new songs and 'heart' were straying ever further from the AOR field. I had to follow what I had inside me and that was my first love, seventies Pop/Rock. Also, I was writing with Mick Wilson (10cc) and the buzz and natural collaborating was exciting for me, so to do a 'project' with Mick was obvious. It kind of grew out of control in a very good way! I had to be honest to myself. Moritz are family to me so it was tough but we all understood, and they now can do what they want to do without my seventies illness getting in the way! Ha!

It's quite an unusual band name, Cats In Space, how did you come up with it, and is there any special meaning in the album title, 'Too Many Gods'?

I love cats a lot and I jokingly said to Steevi Bacon, our drummer, that if you put anything to do with a cat on Facebook it gets 100 times the 'likes'! Plus I love the fifties/ sixties 'B' movies from outer space, there's a charm about them. Sadly Steevi and me both lost cats late last year and we said they'd be looking down on us from space, so "Cats In Space" was born.

The album title comes from the opening song, it really is my take on the world and all that's wrong with it; "too many gods brainwashing so many people into doing such horrific things". I don't want to preach but god, people! Why not worship yourself and your family, stop praying to something that no one knows exists? Too many wars man, caused by religions, so how can God be cool?

Tell us about the members of the band you are working with now.

Well I am blessed to have such talent involved. First up is Steevi Bacon, a drummer who is from the Cozy Powell school of drumming and perfect for this sound, and he is a best mate who I love dearly in a manly way! We have guitarist Dean Howard, who as everyone knows has played with a lot of folk and again firmly 'old school', very cool, and plays for the song. Deano I have known for a long time and always wanted to play with him. We have Jeff Brown, a superb bassist and singer, who again, is a seventies nut and played in the Sweet for many years - nuff said! On keyboards we have Andy Stewart, everyone knows he goes everywhere with me, and has done since 1982, poor sod, he must hate me by now! A truly wonderful pianist. And we have the monstrous Paul Manzi who played some live shows with me last year. I love Paul's voice; he really can do it all! Also, our '7th member' is of course Mick Wilson, who is just the most wonderful singer, writer and all round musician, and has been paramount in being on my side all along the way, forming the 'sound' with myself, a real inspiration.

Listening to the album, I picked up on a lot of influences. 'Too Many Gods' and 'Only In Vegas' reminded me of eighties ELO, 'The Greatest Story Never Told' could be John Miles, I even detected hints of Jellyfish and Queen over many other tracks. Are any of these bands influences on you guys?

God yes, you hit the nail right on the head there. I am so glad everyone is picking up on this. I am not shy in saying I hold no mystery to the influences on every song and have no problem if people 'kindly' compare us to any of these giants! My whole objective was to make a record that may give 'a nod' to the classic seventies albums from these mega bands, a hard task but I like to think I have got close. Jellyfish? Well, we have the seal of approval from none other than Tim Smith, Jellyfish bassist on the second album. I wanted this album to 'sound' like those bands, and remind people of the days gone by when buying a vinyl was an exciting experience.

Far too often Melodic Rock bands just use the keyboards to overlay the guitars, you guys really let the keyboards shine on their own in the songs, is this intentional?

Yes, one thing I dislike about modern AOR, is this 'blanket' of boring huge washy synths that have no real point other than to replicate 'Jump' by Van Halen. If you listen to the proper old school AOR and Rock, there was piano, moogs, and Hammond all creating their own 'part', not just bomb blasting their way into the front of every track – like it did in the eighties. There should be a texture and a mood to help the song in question, stuff needs to 'breathe', and a piano can say so much if it's given a point. See Elton, Queen, ELO, all those songs have a purpose; we only used vintage keyboards on this album and that is why it sounds like it does. Keith Emerson's

grand piano is just the best thing I have ever heard in my life and its all over our album – thanks Keith! – as is a 1973 mini moog, a Selina string machine, Fender Rhodes, Wurlitzer organ, etc… all keyboards that were staple sounds in the seventies, we had at our disposal.

I love the first single 'Mr. Heartache' and you have even put together a cool video to accompany it. It's something of a dying art, video, isn't it?

Yeah, the video, tricky one, a necessary evil for YouTube and online sites. I didn't want us, a group of 50+ year old men, trying to be all 'Rock' and look like we were trying too hard in a windy gravel pit somewhere in Kent!! Like every other Rock video these days. So we decided with our director Ken Evans to make something quirky, to introduce the band and say "yes this is different, Cats In Space are different". Hopefully we have got that right; a lot think we are different right now, so job done I think! You'll see us mucking about in later videos by the way, cos the band are nuts. On the next album I intend to have a full scale spaceship built!

I know you are a huge Sweet fan, how did you manage to get Andy Scott of Sweet to play on the album?

Ten grand in cash! Ha ha! Working with the man, that in 1971 made you want to be him, and his band were everything to a then skinny school kid for many years; so influential. Fast forward to 2014, the same man is asking you what to sing on 'your' song? It was very special, and Andy is a wonderful man who has done and seen it all. To have him give me the time of day was just amazing. Mick Wilson set it up, as at the time the track was ear marked for Mick's second solo album but it kinda went into the 'pot'. I do however owe Andy and his friends a drink, cos i buggered of last time without buying a round and it has not been forgotten! Haha!!

How long did it take to write the songs for this album?

Mick and myself started with 'Mr. Heartache' last Summer and worked on a lot of demos at Mick's studio from then up until April this year. I was also demoing some songs on my own, we had fourteen tracks for the album. I must stress that a couple of songs were actually demo'd up with Moritz before the split, so Ian Edwards and myself had a few songs kicking around. Some I hope will emerge on their next album too. I would say a year in total. It was a lot of hard work, but Mick and me have just touched the surface of what we can achieve, so it's very exciting.

Is this a project, or a band that will be gigging in the future?

This I must stress is no project, not at all! It is a proper full on live band that intend to do things the 'old school way' and play live, release records on vinyl, try and bring some excitement back to the scene and take over the world. The players onboard are awesome and I can see so much promise with it. I have some big ideas and a lot of music to release. The second album is already planned and recorded in some instances; we have several songs already in record/demo position and we have a stash of special cover songs we want to release too.

Finally, for anyone not having heard Cats In Space, describe the band's music for our readers Greg.

It is 'POWER POP ROCK', we don't want to try to be cool, or heavy, or trendy. We are unashamedly honest, old school Pop Rockers like all those bands from the seventies that got into the charts and brightened up a dull Top of the Pops! 10cc, City Boy, Queen, ELO, Supertramp, etc, etc. That is what the 'Cats' love and that is what we are aiming to be like.

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QUEENSRŸCHE
CONDITION HÜMAN

To throw into disorder or disarrange. To disturb the condition, action or function of. To make insane. All terms which describe the word Derange. However with debut album, 'The Awakening', arriving from a group of London based Rocking Metallers of the same name, you can also add caustic, melodic, powerful and passionate to that list. Derange front-woman Cat Pereira reveals the secrets behind the awakening of her band to Fireworks' Steven Reid. Photo by Marianne Harris.

Derange began back in 2012. What was the initial spark, which caused the band to come to life?

I knew I wanted to start a project that was original and fresh, something I believed in and was ambitious for. It was a time in which I immersed myself with a lot of music and listened to a lot of Nu-Metal acts such as Guano Apes, Deftones, Rage Against The Machine etc... I was captivated into bringing back that sound and that energy. The idea was shared to the rest of the members that formed Derange's line-up, and the rest is history…

A year later and the 'Ego' demo emerged. How do you look back on your early recordings now?

We have grown so much as a band. We'll always be proud of the early songs, they created a path for us and opened many doors, one of them being the development of our music. I guess just like any bands in their early days, the initial sounds are forged from acts that inspire us and as time goes by, we go on and create our own sound. In our case, the Derange sound. I guess the more we wrote, the more we were aware of the sound we wanted to create. When the band started, we had that goal of being part of a specific genre, and one genre only, and having one limited catalogue of inspirational bands. As time went by, I think our vision towards music became more peripheral. We became more open minded by experimenting and listening to different music, hence maturing ours.

In 2014 the 'Change' EP was released to universally positive reviews. That must have been an important step for the band?

It certainly was. It was a step further into becoming the band we ambition to be. We were extremely pleased how this EP was released, and so overwhelmed with the amount of fans that adhered to it. It made us hungrier to create new and better music.

Which brings us to your excellent new album 'The Awakening'. As the title suggests it's a lyrically deep body of work. What are the ideas and concepts behind the songs and album?

I wanted to create something with a deeper meaning. When 'Change' was written, the concept had some sort of egotistical vibe to it, as the lyrics were focused on events that only I experienced and wrote about. There was a lot of 'Me! Me! Me!' involved. For this album, I wanted to repel the ego and create something more universal, related to the next person. I didn't want a 'me', I wanted a 'we'.

The concept of this album focuses on the mind, and the psychological pain surrounding it. It's a powerful tool that every human being possesses, but can also be very destructive. We become identified with it and it possesses you, leading to a lot of sadness and pain but we do have a power to silence it, hence finding inner peace.

In the beginning, I had it stuck in my head that each song would be a step closer to enlightenment and peace, like an arrow going straight up. But as time goes by, we go through a rollercoaster of emotions and several ups and downs. Life happens I guess. We're simply human beings. This made the meaning of the songs more real and raw, and they all describe several levels of human emotion and consciousness. So instead of that straight up arrow, it turned into a never-ending circle.

Do you think it is important for a band to have something worthwhile to say, or message to get across to their fans?

It's always great when you have something to say, but not necessary at times. Sometimes the music speaks for itself and people feel fulfilled by it. Music has its own language that people are going to be moved by. However I personally love when bands push their fan's creativity. Giving them the chance to create their own stories and be part of the journey.

Musically you suggest many different and eclectic acts as possible touching points, or influences. It's the ever-unanswerable question…but how would you describe the sounds Derange make?

Oh, that is a tricky question ha ha! I guess it's a mix between melodic nuances and catchy riffs. Atmospheric, sometimes technically tense verses followed by the release of sing-along choruses.

You've teamed up with renowned producer Russ Russell for the album. It must have been amazing to work with such a respected producer on your debut?

It was awesome working with Russ. He was so encouraging towards our work and made sure we sounded the best we could. Plus he made us feel so comfortable right from the start. We made sure we listened to every single piece of advice he gave us. It was also great to know he shared the same visions as the band did, which made our communication much more efficient.

I have to comment on the excellent vocals on the album. They really do hit with real force, but are also capable of seducing through a beautiful clean approach and prove integral to the Derange attack. Do you think that the "Modern" vocal style gives Derange the opportunity to broaden the appeal of the band beyond the people you'd normally expect to listen to the music you make?

Depends on what you mean by "Modern" ha ha! For this album, we definitely chose the melodic and clean approach when it comes to vocals. People connect to melody, it's one of the main factors that connects people to a certain song. This goes for any genre of music. And as much as this choice we made broadens the appeal of the band, our main goal was to make our music genuine and true to ourselves, and not try to be like any other band.

In terms of writing, how do you guys go about constructing your songs? Do you get together and jam, or is there a writing "team" who bring the ideas…?

It all starts with an idea that one of us comes up with. It can be a melody, a bass line, a riff... Once someone brings something to the table, everyone has the chance to work on it and add their flavour to it. Usually the vocals and guitar gather around to build the foundation.

So, what's next for Derange? Some live dates? A support slot across the UK and possibly further afield? Or straight back into the studio for album number two?

We have a lot of things going for us at the moment. Live dates are definitely the next big thing for us. We can't wait to play this album to all our fans and rock out on stage.

Riverside

Photo: Mariusz "Kobaru" Kowel

Riverside are known for making dark, melancholic Progressive Metal music. On their new album 'Love, Fear And The Time Machine', the band have gone back to their roots, to record an album with a lighter (for them anyway) more Rock inspired musical outlook. Ian Johnson talks with the band's guitarist Piotr Grudzinski about the shift in sound, and what the new album is all about.

I've been listening to the album for quite a while now Piotr, and I have to say the music seems to be 'slightly happier' than your typical Riverside album.

Actually, the whole idea of the album came from our singer Marius Duda, who said to us that we should try to write and compose music for the new album like 70/80's Rock bands did. Try to have a warmer, less heavy sound and use more bass as our background sound, like a lot of bands back then did. The happiness you mentioned, well I'm not sure about that, maybe happiness is the wrong word, I would say this album and its songs are more hopeful than before because you could say our previous albums were quite sad ones but this new CD brings a hopeful and more positive feel to our music.

The new songs all seem to speak of change and growth in the human condition, so is this a concept piece or songs based around a theme?

The album itself and the music we wrote is more song orientated than before, the lyrics could be considered a concept but it's not really a full story. What happened was Marius had a tough year and he made during that time two, in my opinion great albums, ours and one for his Lunatica Soul project. And this I think drove his lyric writing for the new album, his mood and the way he was feeling informed his lyrics. We're both turning forty this year, so again the looking back and growing you mentioned and how we've changed also informed the music.

Even though the songs are on average over six minutes, they're gone in what feels like a few moments, but always leave their mark on you as a listener.

I know what you mean. This is the first album I think, that we didn't have a song that was over ten minutes long, we wanted to let the melodies of the songs do the talking, we wanted those melodies to stay with the listener and sometimes on long tracks you lose those melodies. What was most important for us was to have a lot of, how can I put it, 'air', in our music, lots of space, more guitar, less keyboards. We wanted melodies and harmonies that you could instantly remember. I think actually that this album should have had the title 'Song' (the title of the band's last album 'Shrine Of New Generation Slaves' spelt out the word song) because this is a much more song orientated album that we've done before.

I'd like to ask you about the wonderful 'Towards The Blue Horizon', which really isn't you're typical Riverside song.

Well I'd actually say that there are quite a few songs on the album that people wouldn't expect from us not just 'Towards…', there's 'Discard Your Fear' or '#Addicted' these are songs we never tried to do before and we're so happy with how they turned out. When we compose it's Marius who's the main songwriter and he brings his ideas to the table, then we as a band work on them and build the song around his original ideas, until we get the finished track. As a band I think that's our strength we don't ever make music or sound like what you'd expect, one minute we can be all Metal then the next Pop Rock, we don't ever want to be predictable musically and that's why I think our fans love what we do. So on 'L,FATTM' you get Riverside but not Riverside if you know what I mean, our core sound is still there but lots of other musical things are going on as well.

If you don't mind me comparing you to another band, I think that some of the melodies on the new album could have come off the last couple of Anathema albums. The melodies have that same ethereal melodic quality that Anathema's music has.

No I don't mind that at all, they are a great band. Funnily enough my wife said the same thing. What's hard when you make music for a living, is to try not to wear your influences on your sleeve. I think we have a unique sound of our own and we didn't try to write like Anathema, it just happened a little bit but if your going to have a comparison, then that's not a bad one. I really believe that no musician sets out to sound like another, that's not what you hear in your head when you write songs, and Riverside, I think personally, don't sound like anyone else. That's because each member of the band has their own musical influences and they are quite different from each other. So that is where Riverside gets its unique sound from.

You have a few UK dates coming up very soon don't you?

Yes, the British audience is growing for us and we get old and new fans at the shows. We started small with only a date here or there in the UK but now we can do five dates because of fans wanting to see us. Manchester, Bristol, Edinburgh are all places we love to play and come back to, unfortunately we played in Liverpool and they didn't like us at all (laughs) so no gig there this time around. It's been hard work but we love to play in front of people who love what we do and the UK plays an important part in Riverside's story.

Will there be a DVD of this tour?

Hopefully yes, the plan was actually to record one after 'Shrine…' but that didn't come off. We hope that we'll be able to record one on this tour. The dates we play in 2015 will see us working the new songs into a live setting and getting them just right, balancing the old and new material getting it to work together. Then we'll record the DVD sometime early next year. We start our Autumn tour in the USA soon, then it's South America. After that we'll look at the countries we've missed out and try to get there to play some dates. There's also some Festival dates. Then early next year we'll look into the DVD and at the same time we'll be promoting the new album, because we are all really very proud of it. So hopefully we'll get to see everyone at one of our gigs - though not in Liverpool!

THIRD EYE BLIND

Third Eye Blind has sold over twelve million albums and were a band that personified the American music scene in the late Nineties. The debut album went six times platinum and the original record deal that the band signed with Elektra was the largest ever publishing deal for an unsigned artist. With a somewhat jaded history – controversy has always followed band singer Stephan Jenkins around with various lawsuits from ex band members – sporadic releases and Jenkins own charisma, the band still remain popular with their loyal fan-base. A six year hiatus sees the release of a new album 'Dopamine', announced by Jenkins as the last ever. Mike Newdeck caught up with lead singer and chief songwriter Stephan Jenkins about the new album.

It's been six years since 'Ursa Major', why the long delay between albums?

We wrote the album 'Ursa Minor' in short order but we had line-up changes and I wanted to start over, develop a new album, a new chemistry. That takes awhile. Plus there was all that touring on 'Ursa Major'. We simply didn't have the time or the personnel to undertake it any earlier.

Is this really going to be 3eb's last album? We've heard it before.

I'm going to try to switch to a platform where we put out songs as they come, going forward. I'm really over this store up a bunch of songs and put them all out at once thing. I'd rather up the tempo of engagement with our fans and also raise my happiness quotient by developing a new model of putting out new music. That looks like the future to me and obviously to a lot of other musicians.

What happened to 'Ursa Minor'?

Oh it's floating around in the ether. Those songs will find their place, but they felt too much like what we were doing around 'Ursa Major' so we shelved them for something new and something that could involve the new guys in the band. I guess we wanted to move things on.

'Dopamine' sounds like classic 3eb to my ears, but what do you consider the differences compared to earlier albums?

I think 'Dopamine' is more pulsing, simpler in the rhythms, less syncopated, more driving. I think it sounds better. Everything flows more readily than before and it's probably easier on the ear, I didn't go that way on purpose it just seemed like a natural progression.

What is the song 'Dopamine' about?

It's about trying to spare yourself from attachment but getting drawn into it anyway. Or something like that. You're addicted to something because it makes you feel good but in a way you don't want it.

'Shipboard Cook' has become something of a live staple, why is that and what's it about?

We've been playing lots of different songs from 'Dopamine', but I enjoy it when we play that one. What's it about? I never know how to answer that. I guess it deals with sublimating your identity into another.

'Rites Of Passage' uses some synth beats and loops... what inspired that?

One of those recording sessions where it felt like we could do anything we want. We jammed out at the end of the song and used all the vocals on the first take of the jam. Suddenly it just turns into a dance party. There was no planning or forethought. We go by the way we feel.

'Dopamine' is an album of two halves, the first half being more upbeat than the second, was this by design and why?

When I made the sequence, I imagined it going with moods. I guess it's like extroverted and introverted I suppose. That's how it turned out and I suppose it was intentional.

'Exiles' is a stand-out song on 'Dopamine', what's it about and where did the inspiration come from for it?

The song's a narrative and I'm always singing about those people born in shadow. The emotional landscape really came from the guitar line, which is somehow nostalgic and incessant, like lending something that's right in front of you.

Who's spoken voice is it in 'Say It'?

That's K-Flay she's an alternative indie artist with simple Pop and Hip Hop influences. Please go buy all of her records, go to her shows, and generally worship her as we all do.

How easy is it for 3eb to keep going? What drives you forward?

Oh we've got the wind at our backs my friend. We're like pirates sailing to undefended ports. It's easy as plunder. Seriously though, I'm a musician and that's what I love doing, if I stopped what else would I do? It's my life and writing songs makes me who I am. I have never felt like packing it in, that won't happen.

Are there any 3eb songs you dislike from the band's early career?

There are a few but I really can't remember, it's not worth dwelling on, you move on and try and improve your writing; it's unimportant.

Is 'Semi Charmed Life' a bit of a millstone around your neck?

A fan said they like hearing 'Semi-Charmed Life' live because "for four minutes summer's on the way and everything is perfect." I like that. If that's what the fans like then we'd be stupid not to play it and it is our biggest hit. Without that song I probably wouldn't have been successful, we owe it our attention.

Tell me about the new band members?

Kryz Reid was discovered by Brad Hargreaves when Brad was playing in his three-piece Hard Rock band in Dublin, Ireland. Kryz has a muscular "Pagey" style, and way too many pedals. His eyes are pools of gold and he taught himself Japanese while on tour, spoken with a thick Irish accent of course.

Alex Le Cavalier is so in his prime it's kind of breathtaking. Girls stare up at him and all start spontaneously breathing through their mouths. That's his real hair. I mean it. That's not a weave. He plays bass with so much weight and soul we call him The Buffalo.

Alex Kopp is a mischievous subversive X-factor. You never see him coming. He started as a tech. Because we never had a keyboard player, we've always been a four piece, but he kept sitting in for parts until we realised the stage is just better with him on it. He really likes Pop music, which is somehow such a fabulous Punk-Rock 'fuck you.' It sends the indie bloggers running. He's got a really pretty belly on account of his vegan diet of moss and dirt. Sometimes he takes it out at shows and everyone says "Ah" like they just saw fireworks.

Will you ever revisit your acting career?

I got asked to audition for Elvis in Martin Scorsese's HBO drama on Rock n Roll, but I'd just gotten off tour and was headed on a surf trip. Maybe next time. I'd like to play James Bond. You know, catty lines dropped in Tom Ford suits. But they won't let me play it because I'm not British. Snooty bastards.

We already have Royal Hunt and Royal Flush, where does the name Royal Mess come from?

The two words *Royal* and *Mess* represent how my life has been before; a mixture of something very good and something really bad. It also represents how the world looks today, I think; we have this beautiful planet but where are we heading? I guess you read the papers, watch the news and probably you know what I'm talking about...

Given your previous history with Treat, and a whole host of other acts, it seems that it has taken you a musical lifetime to finally do a solo album. Why now?

There are two reasons. Firstly, today anyone can record an album, so why not me? If the music business would have been the same today as it was in the 80s and 90s I would't even have had the chance to make an album of my own because there were too many people at the record companies who would have been more suitable for selling old cars or even vegetables. I'm glad many of those people are gone now. Today you can more or less make your own rules, and my album is the result of that. Secondly, I had to prove to myself that I could do it. I also had some really good songs that had been rejected by a band I played in before and never seemed to make it to an album. I just had to get them released, and now they're out! The funny thing is, and I'm not surprised, both in the reviews and people that I talk to like those songs the best. I'm talking about 'Aces High' and 'Trip', for example.

The guest list looks like a who's who of Swedish musicians. Did you miss anyone or have you a another stack of guests lined up for a second album ?

All of the guests on my album are actually my friends and colleagues that I've played with or have had a relation to through the years. Kee Marcello, for example, I've known since 1982. The next album will definitely contain more of my talented friends!

Given your open acknowledgement of your alcohol issues over the past few years I am assuming from the lyrical content that some, if not all of the songs are in some way autobiographical, or at the very least in some way referencing your own experiences

That's correct. I've had some really bad experiences with relationships a few times. But I don't really blame them for everything. I see it as I've been an idiot. I should have known better than to get involved with all that shit. People have always told me that I'm too nice to others, I have only myself to blame. 'Hell City' and 'Gold Digger' are both dedicated to the same girl/woman. My love for her made

'Nalle Pahlsson - bassist' it says on the resume. Nalle spent much of his time with Treat and Therion, however after almost thirty years in the music business, a combination of friends, music and a new found clarity have presented Nalle with the opportunity to record his first solo album, 'Royal Mess'. Getting the lowdown of the aftermath - Kieran Dargan

me blind – and deaf! I didn't listen to the people who warned me. She had a very bad reputation there in Dalarna, Sweden. The relationship with her cost me a lot of money. She knew how to manipulate... The song 'Breakout' is about another sick relation I had. The words in the lyrics *"I was given my salvation through some punches in the face"* are actually true. Once she hit me with punches in the face so hard in the bathroom that I fell down in the bathtub – twice! I will write more about those two stories on my blog at rocknytt.net later on. When it comes to the drinking I was only living like an addict for about two and a half years. I became a period drinker. It's strange that you can become an alcoholic when you're that old but I guess I was hiding, running away from reality. I felt that I needed to get numb because I was unhappy and couldn't stand my current situation; stupid but true. For about four and a half years I'm free from all of that and I'm happier than ever. Life is moving in the right direction again!

Musically, the album is pretty much old school Hard Rock. What we would call a meat and potato album - no unnecessary frills, just good old-fashioned straight ahead Rock and Roll.

Correct, and I'm happy you say that because that's just what it's all about. I'm a big fan of AC/DC and KISS. No show-offs, just straight forward Rock! I like that. I grew up with the classic British Hard Rock bands such as Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. All those bands are still the foundation of everything that is me musically, even if I like lots of other types of music too. I've actually always called myself a *'Meat and Potato Bass Player'*. I can play more complicated stuff but it's not very often I use it. I believe in the simplicity and power in the music.

I notice a definite seventies and early eighties vibe, perhaps a nod towards some of the classic KISS style riffs of the seventies. Does this reflect your own musical influences?

Sure! I'm very influenced by KISS, I even collect their merchandise. My room at home is full of it! I started listening to them in 1974 but I hated that they took off their make-up; it was like Superman was gone! My heroes started to copy Bon Jovi, Van Halen, Ratt, etc. I hated it! Their reunion with make-up in 1996 was one of my happiest moments ever! The Deep Purple Mk2 reunion in 1984-85 with 'Perfect Strangers' is also one of my happiest moments in life.

How daunting was it to contemplate doing your first solo album? Most of us know you from your time with Treat and Therion but all of a sudden you are the main man. Did you find it a big transition?

Of course it's different in some ways but it's mostly about psychology. I'm used to being the man behind someone else or just a team player, but I hope I will manage. I've been in this business for over thirty years now, but please wish me good luck, ha ha!

So what in 2015 represents success to Nalle Pahlsson? Is it good sales, positive reviews or plain and simply, considering the dark times you went through, just being here and able to tell your story through Royal Mess?

Just to have the album released is a personal victory to me. I know that albums don't sell that much today, if you're not AC/DC or KISS of course, so I really don't expect anything. It feels like I'm only enjoying the ride. So far I've read two reviews of my album and they were so good I almost cried when I read them. And stories? Well, for the next album what should I write about? Maybe I have to make more mistakes and start to drink again to write interesting lyrics? (Laughs) No, never! I guess I will always have something to tell.

TRIVIUM

Rock music is a funny thing; it has the capacity to surprise and annoy in equal measure. What can be someone's passion can be another man's poison. A band like Slipknot would have readers of this magazine diving for cover and yet Corey Taylor's side project Stone Sour would probably pique the interest with its more melodic slant. So it is with Trivium. The latest album 'Silence In The Snow' from the Floridians might just change opinion with its foray into classic Metal territory and interest those who previously considered Trivium to be a Screamcore/Metalcore band complete with despised thudding down-tuned riffs and growling vocals. Mike Newdeck caught up with guitarist Corey Beaulieu to talk about the latest album and the new sound.

"Well we're here in the Warner offices doing the promo for the album, interviews, phoners," the guitarist reveals. "We've finished some festivals and we've been doing the promo stuff around Europe. It's fun at the start but after a year it does get a little tedious answering those same questions."

Trivium has in the past experimented with their sound but always within the realms of the Heavy Metal genre.

"Well our records have always been something different," Beaulieu explains, "but it's always been in Metal because that's what we like. When I first heard it I thought it was the best; we're Metal heads from Extreme Metal to the classics like Dio and Sabbath. So we write music as Metal fans. I'm only thirty one but we were into Metallica and Maiden as teenagers. When we got a bit older I didn't really like the Nu-Metal genre and so we went searching for older stuff. We loved the history thing and wanted to learn about it."

Beaulieu thinks that on the new record, Trivium have looked back to go forward.

"We love the big epic songs from the bygone era," he continues. "'Heaven And Hell' era Sabbath or 'Rainbow Rising' and we love the energy of it. We wanted to bring that into our music and capture that vibe and that structure." An unusual admission from a band more in sync with a growled or screamed vocal delivery, although it has to be said that the band has dabbled with 'clean' vocals in the past.

"The idea for 'The Crusade' was, on paper, a cool idea," the guitarist notes, "but we went into it without planning it properly and flying by the seat of our pants without actually being able to pull it off. The album did well but we learnt a lot from our mistakes. For this album we've grown up, matured and have the experience to make it work properly."

Experience can take musicians so far but new techniques must play a part. Beaulieu agrees.

"In the past we didn't have to do too much with the songs themselves or the melodies. The vocals had to be there in a way that delivered the songs and that had to be learned. You can't do melody and hooks without singing them properly; screaming won't do that. The label didn't force us into this direction, it was something we always wanted to do but until now it didn't seem right. The label only heard it when it was finished. They had belief in us." Beaulieu thinks the fans will have the same belief too.

"I think the material is strong enough to impress them," he enthuses. "We thought during the writing process that it would be something special and we'd always known that people loved the more melodic side of the band and not just the bits with the screaming, so we were confident. On the other hand why would we want to go back and make another album like 'Ascendancy'? That was an album that defined that particular era of Metal for us. It was fresh then, why revisit it? We needed to move on and do something fresh now. What was done ten years ago has become unexciting for us and the fans."

The whole feel of the album, right down to the title 'Silence In The Snow', hints at a concept.

"Well the songs all flow together and there's a cathartic theme running through the album," the guitarist concedes. "It's not a concept as such but the songs compliment each other and give that feeling. The overall message of the album is positive though, with an aim to improve on things, be it life, relationships or whatever. The other thing that we did was decide very early on what qualities the album had to have so that we could concentrate on recording the best songs straight away to go onto the album, rather than pick twelve from twenty. However we didn't want the songs to sound

the same and we did that too. 'Pull Me From The Void' was written at the last minute because we needed one more song to finish the album. We wrote it to order because we wanted a different song to the others."

This more melodic album from Trivium may just bring in a few new fans, particularly those who shy away from the gruff or screamo vocal style of the earlier albums.

"Well I really like the Extreme Metal, but melody has always been important to me as well," Beaulieu explains. "The melody has to be triumphant and conquering rather than happy, and of course, if I'm thinking that way then others are too. People like infectious stuff, it's human nature. It's still Metal though."

Michael 'Elvis' Baskette must take some credit for the sound and direction of 'Silence In the Snow'. The guitarist agrees.

"We live near to each other in Orlando so we got together, played a few songs and I told him what we wanted the album to be like and because our tastes were similar we had common ground. He understood where we wanted to take it, with the kind of big melodic classic Metal element. When we worked on the record he played a big part in defining and refining some of the parts of it, the harmonies, guitar fills and he wasn't afraid to try something different. He got our vision one hundred percent. We'd discussed who we wanted to do the album with our manager and we really wanted to do it at home and so Elvis's name came up, especially as we loved the latest Slash record with him producing. The label at the same time suggested to us that we use him."

Getting Josh Wilbur (Lamb Of God) seems like a master stroke to get the sound that you wanted.

"Well having a specific idea for the record means that you can move things in that direction. We wanted to get rid of the modern mixing and mastering methods of being as loud as possible and where every instrument or vocal track is put to maximum. If you want to crank the volume up in the car then it's already loud and so if you turn it up louder compression kicks in, stuff sounds smaller. We wanted to keep the dynamics of the recording like they used to twenty plus years ago so that turning up the volume makes things sound bigger and fidelity isn't crushed. Josh was able to understand this and do that for us. He liked the idea of producing something that was great audio with detail and dynamics. How some kids listen to recordings that cost $150,000 dollars to make on a shitty iPhone speaker is beyond me."

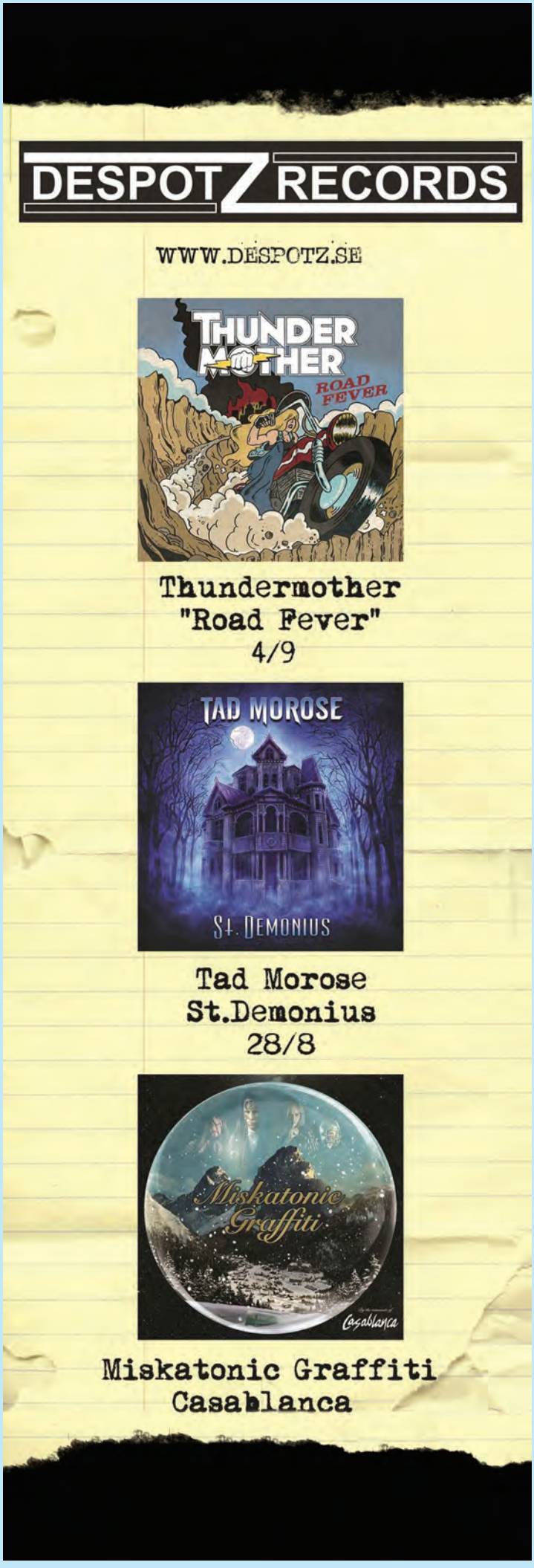
Trivium has always been compared to Metallica and indeed it is well documented that they've been influenced by them. The comparison has advantages and disadvantages.

"We shouldn't be ashamed of what we're influenced by," Beaulieu reckons, "but at some point we decided that we wanted to get away from that style. We don't copy them but we admire them and the direction that they went in. They're a blueprint of how things should be done in Heavy Metal and an inspiration."

Is Metal in safe hands with Trivium? Beaulieu thinks so.

"We're going to carry on doing what we do," he announces stubbornly. "But let's face it, there are other bands carrying the torch. Avenged Sevenfold is one of them but they haven't suddenly become a festival headliner, they've had to build up a history to be able to do that and that's how it works. They'll be plenty of other Metal bands coming through, there always is. Volbeat is another one and of course In Flames. We include ourselves in this movement and this record shows that we're ready to step up. But hey, we've earned our place, we're successful because of hard work but when you look at some bands that can't make a living out of their trade playing Metal and are just doing it for the love of music then you have to say yes, we are very lucky indeed. We're fortunate to have our fan-base that is so dedicated to us."

Trivium will being hitting the festival scene next summer before embarking on a headlining tour of Europe including the UK.



QUEENSRŸCHE

With the court case for the name now settled in favour of original members Michael Wilton, Eddie Jackson and Scott Rockenfield, the rejuvenated Queensryche are brimming with confidence, as shown by the quality of their new album, 'Condition Human'. Featuring the incredible vocals of Todd La Torre and with a line-up that also includes guitarist Parker Lundgren, Seattle's finest are firing on all cylinders again. Phil Ashcroft spoke to Todd La Torre about a great set of songs that all fans should be more than happy with.

"I think there's a lot of diversity on the album," says Todd proudly. "When you use the term 'fans', that's a broad spectrum, because as you know, there are fans from the EP days, the 'Rage For Order' days, and then you have fans who learned of the band from 'Empire' or 'Operation : Mindcrime'. In short I do believe that there's something for everyone on this album, but I think it's geared towards the earlier core fanbase. It's definitely more complex, a little more progressive, it's heavier in many ways and I certainly think it will resonate a lot with the fans of the band from the beginning up to 'Empire'."

With original singer Geoff Tate adopting the moniker Operation Mindcrime for his group, La Torre is more than aware of the effect the court's decision to award sole ownership of the Queensryche name to the version he's part of has had on the band.

"That didn't really change our approach to writing, if it had any effect it was that a load has been lifted from the band and psychologically we were in a better place and could focus more on just the writing than those other variables," he says. "It wasn't written as a concept album," he continues, "but the reason why it was titled 'Condition Human' is that each song pointed back to various human dynamics that have to do with our own existence, our mortality, relationships… so everything went back to being human and it was more of a diagnosis in the title than anything else."

One thing that Todd is especially keen to point out is that, like the previous self-titled record, the whole band were involved in the creation of the album.

"Yes, everyone was involved in the writing," confirms the singer. "It happens in various ways, sometimes Michael (Wilton) and I will exclusively work on something and then introduce it to the guys later. There are other songs that Eddie (Jackson) wrote all of the music and lyrics on, Parker (Lundgren) wrote some stuff, and there are songs that Scott (Rockenfield) wrote and then I came in and added the lyrics and melodies. There are multiple combinations of writing partners and also stuff that the entire band worked on together, but usually it's a couple of guys working on something, and then after the main structure of the song has been put together we all work on the arrangement, that's when it becomes more of a collaborative 'Queensryche' effort!"

One of the biggest improvements with 'Condition Human' is that the eclecticism of the songs gives La Torre full reign to use his vocal dexterity and show just what he can do.

"I really do think so," he agrees. "With this album I feel extremely satisfied that it 100% represents my voice, because I like to do different stylistic things. I like to sing high notes clean, I like to sing them gritty, I like to do more breathy, soft things, I like to show off my lower register with some very haunting, creepy things. So definitely the music allowed me to really branch out, you have songs like 'Hellfire' which allow a different part of my voice to show, then you have songs like 'Just Us' which starts with a very breathy soft vocal, so there's definitely a diversity in the vocal stylings that represents all of what I like to do. There are other things I like to do in the Blues realm, and then you have the extreme guttural style of vocal that I'm capable of doing that wouldn't fit in the Queensryche sound and I would never try to introduce that, because it just wouldn't be fair to what Queensryche is. For once in my life this album is completely me and I had no restraints, the music called for me to highlight all of those things. For anyone who would say "What does Todd sound like?" this album is 100% completely my style and ability. You know, people have been asking me if 'Arrow Of Time' is a good representation of this album, and I have to say that I don't think it is. It's just one facet of the album, one song out of a bunch of songs, it's just one little piece of the puzzle. It's like asking if 'Silent Lucidity' represents 'Empire', it's just one style on an album that represents diversity."

As Todd brought up the song 'Just Us', I ask him to elaborate how that particular curve ball came about.

"That's a song that Michael wrote the music for and I came in and wrote the lyrics and melodies for, in fact he also contributed to some of the lyrics on that," he begins. "We wanted something that was very organic, it's got acoustic guitars, it has some string orchestration that weaves in and out to give it some more depth, but when it came time to write the chorus I didn't really want the big chest voice thing to happen when it goes 'Time goes by', I wanted something more soft and not so harsh. I'm a huge fan of the seventies singer/songwriter era so I was really feeling it sounded like Crosby, Stills and Nash or America, and Michael really

wanted a Led Zeppelin-y acoustic vibe to the song and didn't want to stray too far from that. He has these vintage effects on his lead guitar, there's a six string and a twelve string on it, very light electric guitar sounds on the lead, and we just wanted the song to really breathe, we didn't want to be constrained to any format or formula. It's a definite curve ball on the record but Queensryche has always been able to not be confined, you have a song like 'Della Brown', and then you have a song like 'Empire' or 'Queen Of The Reich', and then 'I Will Remember', so the band has always been allowed to do those things, and even though it's a definite deviation from many other songs on the record, I thought it was something really nice, that was a good change of pace. And again it shows the lower vocal register, I have a deeper voice and this song felt really good to us, it's one of my favourite songs on the record actually."

The almost eight-minute title-track is another that deviates greatly from the norm, evoking a song they've revisited regularly since Todd's been in the band, 'Roads To Madness' from 'The Warning'.

"Michael wrote most of the music for that initially and the ending was Parker and I, that musical build at the end was from a different song that didn't make the final cut, but it just had this spatial quality to it that lent itself to ending the album. The way the song evolves and then breaks down in the middle, with the build-up to the solo and the heavy part, it kinda reminds me of 'Roads To Madness' meets 'Suite Sister Mary'. The bit before the solo has that chanting, haunting sound that 'Suite Sister Mary' had, it was really this cool, epic thing. So we thought; 'How can we not bore the listener in such a lengthy song, while still being able to transition into these time changes?', and when it was all said and done it was exactly the long song that we'd always wanted to write. It's one of my favourite songs and a great album closer, with that haunting choir and the proggy ending, with one of those parts where you really have to count to come in at the right time. To me it was like old-school Queensryche, today! Do you know what I mean? I love the song and I love the message, I'm very proud of that song."

Their 2013 album was a short thirty-five minute affair, whereas 'Condition Human' is much longer and even has an extra three songs that turn up on different versions of the CD and vinyl. Surely this is a sign of how well things are flowing now that the band know their singer a little better?

"I guess so," he agrees. "I mean, there were so many songs that didn't make it onto this record, it was tough. Right before we went into the studio and we were counting songs, we were at twenty-four or twenty-five songs. There were some that were just pieces but most were fully completed songs, it was tough to decide what would make the final album. At one point our producer 'Zuess' (Chris Harris) said 'OK guys, we'll have to cut this off, we don't have enough time to be recording any more songs than where we're at!' So we just had to pick what we thought were the best at that point, and there were so many layers to each song, it's not like there's just two rhythm guitar tracks and a bass track, and drums, there's just a shitload of stuff going on. We had a ton of stuff written and we'll probably revisit some of those for the next one, and if they're worthy and they shape up into something we can use then we will, but there was a lot of material to sort through."

Rob Zombie producer Chris 'Zeuss' Harris was chosen ahead of celebrated engineer and producer James 'Jimbo' Barton, even though Barton had done an admirable job on the previous record. La Torre pauses for several seconds while thinking how to word the reasons why.

"Jimbo is a world renowned engineer, but Chris was somebody that Michael found, and at the end of the day he really believed in these songs and we really liked what his vision was for this album. A lot of these songs needed work, so we thought it was a great aspect that he was also a musician and could pick up a guitar and just show us how he envisioned a song going as we were developing it, he was able to help us shape up songs that, although there was a lot of it already there, they weren't quite finished. We had worked on the songs for so long that we couldn't really see where we should take them to add that extra something, and he was very instrumental in shaping the songs as a musician and communicating his ideas just by picking up an instrument. Jimbo is a wonderful engineer but we were looking for a producer who would get his hands into the actual music and help us along. When we were first talking with him we gave him a song to see what he could do. He played keyboards on it, he played harmony guitars to Michael's riffs, and vocally I knew that he wasn't afraid to let me sing some things that were more Metal and a little bit more in a gritty style. Queensryche has its own unique sound and style, and I respect it and I understand it, but at the same time I'm not Geoff Tate and naturally my voice is a little grittier and a bit more aggressive in some ways, some of these songs called for that. There were parts where I would do something that's super clean, but it just lacked the attitude and fire, so there are parts where I would get grittier vocally, even though it's not the typical Queensryche sound. I knew that Chris respected the Queensryche sound but would also let me be me at the same time, he let me do things vocally that Queensryche had never done before. I'm not saying that Jimbo wouldn't have let me do that, but there were some instances on the last record where I'd wanted to do those things but was met with some resistance, there were parts where I'd wanted to do some higher screams but was directed not to. I don't want to say anything bad about Jimbo – I like him and respect him, I think he's amazing – but for what these songs were on this album we just felt, as a band, that Chris was the perfect guy. He's a huge Queensryche fan so he respected the sound and the style, and he wasn't expecting to make a record that was commercial like 'Empire', he wanted to bring back the Progressive Metal element, but he also welcomed songs like 'Bulletproof' and 'Just Us', and songs like 'Eye 9' that Eddie wrote, which is very different. He was a huge influence in everyone's parts like the drums, if he thought Scott was playing too much on the rack-mounted toms he'd say "Let's do more China cymbals here and more footwork or floor toms here." He was great at pushing everyone to get the best performance, we were just very pleased, and sonically he did such a great job that the production on the album was everything we wanted it to be, in fact more so. I don't want to sound like I'm undermining Jimbo but the songs on this record resonated more with Chris and we wanted someone who felt the same way about them that we did, and Chris really did, so it just made sense to have him involved in this record."

The fact that Crimson Glory was his first singing gig makes it even more remarkable that someone who considers himself a drummer first and a singer second, should go on to fill the roles of two of the most operatic singers in rock. I couldn't resist asking him whose shoes were hardest to fill, Geoff Tate's or Midnight's? Again he pauses for thought.

"That's a really good question," he says eventually. "They're different, because Crimson Glory's stuff was higher, but there was a certain grit in Midnight's voice that's closer to what I naturally do. It's harder for me to do Queensryche because Geoff Tate never had any rasp in his voice, it was very clean and harder to do for me from a technical perspective. I think Midnight had more emotion in his voice, and because of his range Crimson Glory is harder to hit the notes, but from a technical point of view, Queensryche is harder for me personally. It was a lot more work to condition myself to singing Queensryche songs clean, because I've never been a super clean singer, and that was a bigger challenge for me. Does that make sense?" he laughs.

As we wind up the conversation, Todd's hopes for the album are pretty simple.

"We're just hopeful that the album will be received well," he states bluntly. "There's always going to be criticism, but at the end of the day, no matter how it's received, in my heart I'm always going to be proud of this record. This is definitely not a dated record, it's not like it was written in 1986, it's all brand new fresh stuff, and like I said, no matter how it's received, I'm very proud of it."

And so he should be!

RHINO'S REVENGE

John 'Rhino' Edwards has been the bass player for legendary British band Status Quo since the mid-1980s, where he has contributed rock solid rhythms, backing vocals, and several co-writes with the group. In 2000 he released his first solo foray, entitled 'Rhino's Revenge'. Now, thanks mostly to Quo's hectic schedule, some fifteen years later the sequel has arrived. James Gaden spoke to Rhino to hear all about 'II'…

When we spoke in 2011 (FW#48), you told me you were roping in your son Freddie, in fact several members of your family, to work on this record, but you had to fit it in around school times.

That's right! That's exactly what I had to do. My other son, Max, who is the drummer, he's got a brain the size of Richmond. He's on his fifth university now, he's done Cambridge, Harvard, UCLA, he's just come back from a year in Berlin –

And he's been expelled from all of them?

(Laughs) No, no, no! He's twenty eight and still at Uni, he's just left to go to San Diego for five years, all that time in the sun, the little shit. So yeah, he gave me some time, I had to use him before he had to go, so I got ten days out of him before he went back to his studies. My other son Freddie has become a very much in demand guitar player, and he gave me twelve days. It was great, having them play on it with me, one of the best experiences of my life. When we were making this album, Max asked me about a fill, and I never thought I'd ever make a Rock album where the drummer would turn around and say 'Dad, what about this?' It really was a big love in, the three of us, my best mate Mike Paxman producing, who does a lot of the Quo stuff, and one of the kid's best mates is the other guy in my band, and I got my daughter in on backing vocals. So it was very cheap!

I really liked the lyrics, I think some of the lyrics here are just brilliant.

Oh really? Thank you very much, I do place a lot of emphasis on that side. I don't see the point in listening to songs that sound like they were written on the back of a napkin in a nightclub. I can spend three weeks on a lyric, and I'm pleased you've listened to them.

They were quirky, witty, acerbic… I connected with 'Famous' because I totally agree with your views on the "celebrities" in the mainstream media.

Most of them are Christians being thrown to lions as far as I'm concerned. How fucked up is somebody going to be if they've been on 'The X Factor' or 'The Voice' or whatever, and they have a number one… or like that Irish kid, who was stopped from having a number one by Rage Against The Machine… where will his head be two years down the line, when he's playing in front of twenty people for £80, and being billed as 'The X Factor Winner!' Fuck off. And most of these acts are just re-hashing old material. Where are the new songs? I know there will always be talented song writers, but they don't get the exposure. I appreciate I sound like an old git, but even a lizard can make a record nowadays, it's not difficult anymore. I'm a luddite, I don't use a computer, loads of people do, but I think the machine is dictating what's going on, and I don't like that. I like to rant in my songs. 'New New New' is another one of my rants. Don't get me started!

I really enjoyed 'All The Girls Love A Bastard' as well, the words for that were spot on.

And I really wanted to put that out as a single. I think it's quite funny and very ironic, and I'd like to put it out simply to see if any of the po-faced brigade got hold of it and branded it disgraceful, sexist etc, when in fact it's the opposite. There's one track on the album, 'One Note Blues' and a lot of my mates who love Quo are saying is really good, and I think it is, but it's nothing that Status Quo couldn't have done better. So I've decided I'm going to put out 'Black Widows' instead, and we're doing a video for that.

You mentioned earlier about Mike Paxman being producer, and he has done lots of Quo stuff. Aside from the obvious bonus of him being your best mate, what does he bring to the table?

Well, he produced my first Rhino's Revenge album, and he tells me clearly if he doesn't like something. I wrote a song which was quite close to home and involved the kids and he said 'You can't put that on there.' He looks at things objectively. There were a couple on there he didn't like, but that was tough shit, because I was insistent, and he said after it was done I was right and he was wrong. He prefers things a bit more improvisational, like at the end of 'New New New', I had everything up to the bit with the trumpet, where it goes all Beatles. None of us knew where it was going after that, so we just started playing in E. I just jammed live, with my kids, recording it, and it was great, it doesn't get any better!

It's all happening now. We've just got a distribution deal so you'll be able to get the album, all the details are on the website, or you can just buy it from there. We've done some gigs, by the time this comes out we'll have done the Status Quo Fan Club Convention at Butlins in Minehead, that will be a right laugh. We did a little tour and I've got another one coming up. We're going up a gear, we're playing slightly bigger venues and we're supporting Hayseed Dixie, so that will be great. When Quo finish up at the end of the year, I've got some more shows in February, playing with Eddie and The Hot Rods. And as Max is in California, I've got my nephew drumming. Jobs for the boys! (laughs)

The full length version of this interview is available on www.rocktopia.co.uk

'II' is released on October 23rd. Rhino's Revenge play the following dates with Hayseed Dixie:

Tues October 20th:
Bury St. Edmunds - The Apex
Thu October 22nd:
Southampton - The Brook
Fri October 23rd:
London - O2 Brooklyn Bowl
Sat October 24th:
Frome - The Cheese & Grain
Sun October 25th:
Tunbridge Wells - Assembly Hall

For more details, for February tour dates, or to order the album, visit www.rhinosrevenge.com

ART NATION

Art Nation are a new band formed in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2013. Featuring ex-Diamond Dawn vocalist Alexander Strandell, the band play a very melodic, energetic and entertaining style of AOR that will have fans of H.e.a.t, Brother Firetribe and early Europe champing at the bit to hear their music. Ian Johnson talks with Alex about the band, his songs and what's in Sweden's water that makes it a place where AOR bands seem to spring up by the hour.

Please tell us about Art Nation; how did the band get together?

All the Art Nation guys were old friends of mine. When I was fired from my old band, Diamond Dawn, I decided very soon after to start a new band with my new friends and it just went from there.

I read that you decided to start out by playing live and recording the album at the same time. What material did you play? Was it covers and the odd new song or did you have all the album songs written and just wanted to hone them in a live setting before hitting the studio?

It was very tough to do both at the same time but in the end it was really good that we worked so hard on it. We played a few songs from the new album and the rest were cover songs from the Diamond Dawn days.

Personally, I feel the band seem to have written an album full of singles. I could imagine each one being released on its own and being a hit – in the Rock world that is; was this your intention from the start?

No, I would say that we really just wanted to make the album as good as possible and since we have three great songwriters in the band – each different in his own way – the songs just seemed to work out. Basically it is me, Christoffer and Theodor who write the main bulk of the songs, however the whole band got to be part of it by adding their input and ideas to the music when we were recording the album. It's great though that you think that the songs are so good! Thanks!!

Talking of songs please tell me about the wonderful '3000 Beats' I think it's one of the best AOR songs I've heard this year but it does deal with a strong subject.

It does. I wrote '3000 Beats' in order to bring out the feelings and thoughts that were part of an event that happened in my life a year ago. It is a strong story but it's all true and I used this horrible event that happened in my life as the basis of the lyrics.

You recorded a song and a music video for 'One Is Better Than No One', which was released in collaboration with the humanitarian organisation Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières); tell us about the song and how this all came about.

We really wanted to do something for charity and I contacted 'Doctors Without Borders' because they were very dear to the band. They were really very interested in doing a collaboration with Art Nation, and we're so grateful because the song was a great success and something we're really proud of.

The final song I'd like to ask you about is 'Look To The Sky', which I believe was done in just one take. Was it supposed to be a one-take song or was that just luck in how it turned out?

That's just how it happened. We had no more time left in the studio, so we really concentrated – it really focussed us properly I would say – and the result was beyond everyone's expectations. It's a great moment on the record and really captures the strength of this line-up.

The band and Jakob Herrmann produced the album with a wonderful mix by Jacob Hansen. You must be really happy with how good the album sounds?

Yes, we are super happy. Our overall goal was to get a big warm production mixed with a modern sound and in that, I think we have succeeded.

I've asked this of other Swedish bands, but what is it in the water over there that makes your homeland such a hotbed for AOR and Melodic Rock bands?

I really do not know. I guess we all just really like the genre and want to continue to convey it in our own way.

Tell us about the tour you've just started. I know you've done a couple of dates recently, with the full tour starting at the end of September and continuing on through until December. You must be looking forward to showing off the new album in a live setting?

It feels so great to go out and play now with this new album material. The songs sound so strong live. We are really happy with how it's working out so far and will continue to do everything for this tour in order to make it as good as possible. It's just local dates at the moment. Right now, we know nothing about the rest of Europe or the UK I'm afraid. We do though really want to get out and play in Europe next year, so I'm hoping it's not too long before we have some information on that for you all.

You finish the tour on December the 12th, so what's next for the band, what does 2016 hold for Art Nation?

Well, the plan right now is to start on album number two in early 2016. We will obviously continue to go out and play. Then we have a secret project coming up that we cannot share with you right now, so more news on that as and when…

SHINEDOWN

Interview by Mike Newdeck. Photo by Darren Doane

The last time I spoke to Shinedown drummer Barry Kerch was during the 'Amaryllis' tour over two years ago, so it's nice to catch up and find out how things are going as the band prepare to release their fifth studio album, 'Threat To Survival'.

"Well we've done a small run in the US," Kerch explains. "That was after a nine month break from the previous tour and then we did some Japanese shows and Hawaii. The fan-base in Japan is pretty small, so we're really just starting out with it. We did a concert in Tokyo and three military shows for the US military based out there and then a labour day show in Pearl Harbour."

It's been three years since 'Amaryllis' but didn't the band have another album ready to go immediately?

"That was a mis-quote," Kerch interrupts. "The new album is all new, what Brent really meant was that if we wanted to we had enough material available to put out another record. There was no point in denying it, it had already gone viral. We'd never do that anyway, a new record is what we're feeling at that time."

Rob Cavallo had no involvement in the production of 'Threat...'

"There's a few different producers on this one," the drummer reveals. "I have a job remembering them all; Scott Stevens and Dave Bassett were two and Eric (Bass) co-produced most of it. We wanted a change and we also wrote with the producers too and had them fit into different songs where we thought they would best suit them."

Kerch doesn't feel that the approach took things away from the Shinedown sound.

"We're the same band, using the same writing process," he notes. "We can't change Brent's voice either so it will sound like Shinedown no matter what. The whole process was fun and we tried something new to reinvigorate ourselves. We've had comments about it not sounding like earlier albums but that was years ago and I don't really remember any of that now, you move on. Aerosmith or U2 changed it up over time; they were able to grow with the times. It'd be boring if we did that. You might lose a few die hard fans along the way but most gravitate towards what we're doing."

Shinedown don't really write according to the music climate as Kerch explains.

"If we did that we'd be criticised for trying to be Imagine Dragons," the drummer jokes. "Subconsciously we might be influenced by what's going on around us but when we write we shut ourselves off from everything and our music evolves from there."

'Threat...' is a very different song-wise and production-wise from its predecessor.

"Well for one thing it's more in your face lyrically," he continues. "Brent is far less metaphoric on this record. On 'Amaryllis' lyrics had double meanings and this is more direct. It's also a dark record lyrically, at least on some upbeat songs. 'Cut The Cord' is about freeing yourself from an addiction, as Brent has been doing over the years, which is holding you back. It could be drink, drugs or even a person holding you back because you're addicted to them. 'Black Cadillac' is dark as it talks about Brent and the day he dies, waving goodbye from a hearse. The album is very autobiographical, particularly with reference to Brent who has been an emotional train wreck. He had his most recent bout of depression when we had to cut our last tour and acoustic tour short because of throat problems. Things like that can prey on the mind, especially with Brent. 'State Of My Head' is another fairly self explanatory retrospective song about Brent and his frustrations of fighting with his internal self."

Smith's addictions are well documented but he's not fallen off the wagon.

"If he has he's kept quiet about it," Kerch laughs. "That's good because he's usually boisterous, but as far as being an addict… once an addict always an addict and he fights it every day. He's never got help but he's stubborn and so he won't bother. He gets it done himself and that's where the self torture comes in...at all times. I love that man like a brother, we've been through hell and back and I've saved his life a few times."

The album is rawer and a lot looser, in line with some of the other releases that we've heard recently. Kerch doesn't agree totally.

"It's more organic," he offers, "but it's still got a Modern edge, possibly due to the Pop edge or some of the programming. I like that stuff as well as the heavy music. The album has processed vocals and synthesiser which add to the modern sound and we wanted them in because it made the songs sound better. Like U2 circa 'Achtung Baby'. During our break Eric and I would go into the studio and come up with Gorillaz come Beastie Boys type stuff, so perhaps some of it rubbed off on this new record. The lyrics are up to Brent; he went away wrote with the guys who were producing the record and then he'd come back and we'd put the Shinedown twist onto those songs. It scared the crap out of the label that we wanted to write with other people and use different producers because they only look at the business side and not the artistic bit; they want to make money. They were a little surprised at some of the material we sent them but we told them not to worry and they were won round in the end."

Kerch says that there's always a certain amount of control from the record label.

"It's their business after all," he explains. "They have the final say on the finished songs but not on the process leading up to it. They decide which songs make the record. We did thirty plus and then whittled it down to about fifteen to record and then, say, eleven make the album. I try to keep out of the decision making process and leave it to the other guys, who usually go round and round in circles. On this record it was extremely difficult and originally I had my doubts about some of the songs – but it grows on you."

Kerch has had to do things a little differently this time around in the studio.

"It's been challenging," he admits. "On the last album I'd be given the demo, learn it, put my twist on it, add a couple of fills and then get in the studio, lay down the tracks and then it would be done until percussion overdubs. Finished. On the new one it was more fun and I could be a little more creative although I'm not a Prog drummer. It was more about playing for the song and picking a groove. In the studio there was a lot of drums minus the cymbals; my legs were bruised where I used them as cymbals. Cymbals were done separately too; it gives you better separation during mixing and mastering and allows levels to be adjusted more easily. We also experimented with percussion in Eric's studio. 'Cut The Cord' had separate recording for snare and bass then we overdubbed toms and then cymbals. To play it live I've had to become double ambidextrous so it's improved my playing too.

We even recorded hitting his garage door with a mallet and then putting reverb on it and then on the computer we would come up with counter rhythms. I was much more involved with this album."

The UK has taken to Shinedown and Kerch thinks it pretty simple reasoning.

"In the UK you search out bands and then stick with them," he observes. "In America it's very fly by night and people move from one cool thing to the next. Over in your country we're an album band who don't have hit singles; we're not Coldplay."

Shinedown's live set always comes under scrutiny with people perhaps tiring of the same songs at each gig. Is that going to change with the new album coming online? Kerch agrees.

"I'd love to do a set of new songs with the bulk from the last two records," he continues, "but we always find people want to hear the back catalogue and complain that we don't play enough of it. You can't win with five records. We've had nineteen number one songs in America – which do you leave out? It's more limited with a really short set as support. What do you do?"

Shinedown was recently criticised for Brent miming during some of the sets, a result of his throat infection perhaps? Kerch scotches the criticism.

"People can think what they want," the drummer counters indignantly. "He hasn't ever mimed but people get the idea he does maybe because we run backing tracks for the symphony stuff and added percussion. Perhaps it sounds too good because the sound guy is actually doing his job. Not sure how he'd get away with it singing 'Simple Man' on his own. I don't like miming, it's cheating. As I said before, you have to add other stuff in on backing tapes, although The Milli Vanilli thing is wrong but there has to be a balance. What if you're ill and can't sing? Do you cancel the show and let everyone down or present the paying public with something rather than nothing? Modern technology means that everything has to sound pristine, as on the record, and that's harder to do now with the fantastic recording quality."

With two successful albums already under their belt, Sweden's Casablanca have wasted little time in producing their most ambitious project to date. 'Miskatonic Graffiti' is a concept album with a complex storyline that is certain to captivate many. Dave Crompton asks the questions to vocalist Anders Ljung that may just make things a little clearer.

Releasing a concept album after only two standard releases is a very brave thing to attempt. Whose idea was it, or did you all decide that now was the time to try something as monumental as this?

Never make the same album twice! That's our kinda mantra; the reason our two predecessors sounds like they do is the lack of time in the making, but in a good way. If it works, don't try to fix it, sort of. For the first time in Casahistory we had eons of time together and a big load of songs that sounded very different from each other. We thought that the variety would be perfect to tell a story without the listener getting struck by boredom; so, I had a Lovecraft youth and wrote stuff for an album back then that was never completed or released, so I pulled it out and rewrote it, boosted it to fit what we were looking for. The frame is H.P. Lovecraft's universe to start with, but I guess those frames got blown away after all...

For those who have yet to experience 'Miskatonic ...' or those who struggled, like myself, to comprehend the storyline, could you offer them a relatively simple synopsis?

Well, if you're looking for over simplicity read a children's book or play a video game… haha!! The story surrounds a gang of four main characters, all different from each other, who keep it together and fight for the free spirit of man right before the fall of our civilisation. I really wanted to tell the story of the main characters, their everyday life, their memories and dreams of greater things to come rather than follow the storyline from A-Z. It's in my head and runs slowly but surely towards the end; so for me it's a blast to write around and step away from it, but hopefully it will all come to you in the end – approximately two more records from now.

How did the recording process transpire? Did the music come first, or did the lyrics dictate?

Well writing and recording has never been a problem for Casablanca, but arranging is, and that's where we spend our time and creativity. I think I talk for all of us when I say that's the best part in the end. 'Enter The Mountains' and 'Exit The Mountains' are important for the story and were written for it, while the songs in the middle are more classic Casarockers that fit perfectly to throw the characters in; here, there, back, forth and out of time.

Did you encounter any difficulties along the way, and were there any moments where you regretted taking on such a mammoth task?

It's better to do 'Music From The Elder' while you're super-unknown than when you're the biggest band on the planet! The toughest part was excluding around 20 great songs, or saving them for later. We have been together for seven or eight years now and only regret the things we didn't do! So no fear, no fear at all.

The album is very theatrical in nature. Do you intend touring with it, and playing it in its entirety?

Oh yeah! We never really toured those first two records, either because of a lack of time or personnel, so we said that 2016 is the year to recover all that we lost. The plan is to perform the whole 'Miskatonic Graffiti' and then do a best of 'Apocalyptic Youth' and 'Riding A Black Swan' as the second part. Ha!

Now that 'Miskatonic ...' is in the bag, and about to be released, would you ever consider writing another concept album in the future? Or has this put you off for life?

As soon as we have four to six months together again we start arranging part two of three in the Miskatonic trilogy. We might do an EP or just a regular Casablanca record if the time is short because we think the follow up must be greater, darker, faster and more epic than this one. It also has to set the stage for the third and last part, so it'll take some time I guess.

What is your personal favourite concept album?

It's hard to name one, but let's say that The Who, Alice Cooper and David Bowie helped us through. Hard to choose one, but Alice's 'Goes To Hell' and Bowie's 'Diamond Dogs' pop in my head. But there's more, a lot more!

I'm sure I speak for many Fireworks readers when I wish you all the success in the world for what is a truly scintillating piece of Rock Opera.

I believe the actual impetus to found a band was a music festival you've met at?

Toddy, our drummer and me produced some songs together with different singers, but it wasn't what we were looking for. Then there was a festival at the Loreley with bands like FM, Whitesnake, Survivor and Toto. We met Thorsten Bertermann there, a good friend of ours, and also a singer with a great voice. Suddenly Toddy decided to ask him if he could sing a song for us. He laughed, thinking we were foolin' him, but we were serious. Some days later we sent him a layout and he tried his very best. This was 'Mission of Love', the first song we did together. After we heard him on that song, it was clear we'd found our singer and that we could start our dream of recording our own AOR album.

What musical experience did you have prior to Lioncage?

The three of us played in different professional cover bands for more than a decade. We played more than 2000 gigs entertaining people with songs by other artists – a great experience, but nothing to do with your own creativity. I was tired of playing the next Top 40 single, so I quit the job and founded my home studio to write and produce songs. From the beginning I just wanted to do songs that I would buy myself – no compromise. And it's the same with Toddy and Thorsten, if we do our own music, there's no compromise. Just what we love, which is Melodic Rock and AOR bands like Foreigner, Journey or Toto. Not really popular music these days, but we don't care.

Lioncage remains a three-piece band. What kind of advantages and disadvantages do you think it brings?

A big advantage is that just three people have to make decisions and we're equal. Because of our friends who support us, I can't see any disadvantages. We can't play everything on our own so we invite friends to help us and they do a great job.

Now onto your first album 'Done At Last', released via Escape Music. Could you take us through your personal highlights from it?

Ooh, what a difficult question! I love them all. But I have to mention 'Mission Of Love', because it was the first song we did together, which has that classic Toto flavour. Also 'Dancing Queen' because of the saxophone part and Thorsten sounding a bit like Peter Gabriel or Phil Collins; and also, the Westcoast vibe to it which I love. However, I think it's 'Where Do We Go' that I love the most, with its melody and big sound which owes much to Bob Ludwig's mastering. Another highlight is 'Till The Morning Comes', the only ballad, with great background vocals... As I said, I love them all but the most important thing is that we found our own sound. There are influences but we make our own thing out of it. That's what makes me proud.

The list of guest musicians who contributed to the recording is pretty impressive. How did you hook up with those guys?

They're all great musicians and we've known them for years. We were looking for the best players for every song and they all did their best – for free, as they had so much fun being a part of Lioncage! It's a great honour for us to have them on the album and they'll be on the next one for sure!

Where did the idea to use saxophone on a Melodic Rock album came from?

We had a problem with the solo part in 'Dancing Queen'. I tried a smooth guitar solo, but it didn't work. Then I started playing the acoustic guitar and it sounded good to us….but we needed something else, so I came up with the saxophone. At first the other guys were sceptical, but when Jonny came and played this incredible solo they loved it. I'm a big Westcoast fan and it's not so rare to hear this instrument in that genre.

You've decided to self-produce the album. Why?

I could say it's just a matter of smaller budgets these days, but that's not the whole truth. As a producer you can control your sound – our album sounds exactly as we wanted and we're really satisfied with the result. I got a big compliment from Joe West, Keith Urban's producer, he said "that's a great-sounding album". What more could I ask for?

'Done At Last' is available not only in CD format but also, for example, on the heavily criticised iTunes platform. What do you personally think about iTunes, Spotify and other contemporary alternatives to CD purchase?

I'm a vinyl fan and I love the albums with great artwork and so on... But CD's are okay for me and iTunes is also okay... The problem is that young people don't buy a whole album, but that one song that they like – if they pay for music at all. They don't discover a whole album of an artist as I did when I put on the first side of an album and listened to all these songs. There's a difference with Spotify for example. I really hate these streaming services, because they don't have enough respect for artists to pay them decent amounts of money. It's a shame that millions of people listen to your music and you get a little pocket money for that. Who will want to produce music in the future if no one gets paid for it? It's headed for disaster I guess.

Are there any plans to bring Lioncage to the live stage? Anything else you're up to at the moment?

Lioncage definitely wants to play live. Andreas Laude will play the bass, Dietmar Wulfgram will play the keys and Anja Bublitz will do background vocals. The first gigs are planned for autumn 2015. We're also working on the second album – five songs are almost finished. It's gonna be the same style as 'Done At Last', but with more groove, more melodies and more guitars! (laughs) My personal hero Tim Pierce – a well-known sideman who played with Rick Springfield for several years – will play on our second album. What an honour for us!

The 'power trio' band formula isn't typical for Melodic Rock – and exactly the same goes for introducing saxophone into the genre. However, the newly founded German act Lioncage have proved that both work well for this type of music. Alexandra Mrozowska caught up with the band's co-founder, guitarist and producer Lars Konig to discuss their new 'Done At Last' CD as well as the band's future plans.

Following quickly on from their impressive debut album, 'Wrong Things Right', Australia's The Radio Sun are now about to release their sophomore opus, ' Heaven Or Heartbreak'. Dave Crompton fired some questions to the band on the eve of their next chapter.

For those who have been on a different planet for the past 18 months, could you please introduce the band?

Hello from down under, Australia. My name is Stevie Janevski and I play guitar in The Radio Sun. Our singer's name is Jason Old, our bassist is Robbie Erdmanis and drummer is Ben Wignall. We're a Melodic Rock band from Australia. As a friend put it, 'we all sing in the band' – vocal harmonies are a big emphasis in what we do.

Who are your musical influences?

We're all mainly influenced by a lot of the 70s and 80s Heavy Rock bands. Queen, Kiss, Van Halen, Loverboy, Rick Springfield, Def Leppard, Dokken, Bon Jovi, Winger, White Lion, Danger Danger, Harem Scarem, Nelson, Firehouse, Roxus, Marvelous 3, Waltham….

Your debut album 'Wrong Things Right' seemed to be embraced by many, and rightly so. Were there elements of that album that, in hindsight, weren't quite up to the standards you initially envisaged? If so, did you make that a conscious priority, and eradicate them when creating 'Heaven ...'?

The response from our debut was really positive. We even had a notable radio station in Australia play the song 'World's Crazy Now' off their own back on national radio, which is quite unheard of these days. In particular, it was great to have the Melodic/Heavy Rock community enjoy the album. Andrew from Melodic Rock Records was a fan of my old band Square One so it was great to have him take keen interest in The Radio Sun and release the debut album on his label. There were a few small things that we wanted to improve on from the debut and I think we've come closer to satisfying ourselves on this album. I definitely think this is a much more consistent album with more hooks and has a good balance of lush vocals and some more Heavy Rock guitar a bit more prominent in the mix. Songs like 'Caught Between Heaven & A Heartbreak' and 'Science Fiction Make Believe' have that Dokken-esque guitar riff/sound and tunes like 'You're The One' and 'One In A Million' have more of the Nelson, easy lush vocal thing about them which we also wanted in this new album.

We titled the new album 'Heaven Or Heartbreak' because it stands for how we feel about this album. It's our 'Heaven' and I guess it would be our 'Heartbreak' if it doesn't get received well. We're all really proud of how we've progressed, particularly with the songwriting from our debut to this new album. This new one was more of a band effort as most of the first album was written just by singer Jason and myself. Ben and Robbie joined the band after most of the album was demoed up. This time around we spent more time on the structures of the songs. For instance, we weren't afraid to 'mess around' with parts and add or remove bits to make each song better.

The band have a strong history with the Power Pop genre. Do you intend to gradually move more and more away from that in the future or is it an element that you feel enhances the overall sound?

We love it all! Whether it's Power Pop, Melodic Rock, Heavy Rock, Metal. We're kind of selfish I guess….we'll put all of our influences in the pot, then stir and what comes out is a mix of what we do. I do know what you mean though….I guess we'll always have that Power Pop thing about us. For instance, I can put on some Rick Springfield, Marvelous 3 or Waltham in the car and can't help but play drums on the steering wheel. Having said that, some Kiss, Van Halen, White Sister, Dokken, or Icon also gets me off and sometimes it comes through, and elements of those bands show in parts of our new album 'Heaven Or Heartbreak'. To me if a song is good, it's good and I'm pretty certain that most of the Def Leppard catalogue could be either heavied up or watered down and the songs would still remain excellent songs!

How does the song writing/recording process work within the band?

A lot of our song ideas start with either singer Jason or myself coming up with a rough demo and from there we'll add to them as a band. Having said that, our drummer Ben brought in the complete track 'Walk Away' which we loved from the get go and our bassist Robbie brought in an old song he'd written from years ago called 'Do You Remember', which suited what we were doing. So both songs were perfect for the direction of the album. After this we concentrated on jamming on the songs as a band and refined bits here and there to see if we could suggest any changes for the better. Recording wise, we'll pretty much use the demos as our first draft and after Ben records the drums, we'll try and put in our best performances to complete the songs. We're big fans of that Queen/Def Leppard idea of adding extra layers, whether that be with more guitar hooks/keys/vocal harmonies – depending on whatever picture we're trying to paint for each song.

Paul Laine has been quite integral to your existence so far. How did you get to meet him and what is he like to work alongside?

Paul is a great friend who I originally met on Facebook about five years ago. Back when Jason and I were writing demos for the first album we threw around some names of who we'd like to mix the album. I've always been a fan of Paul's debut solo album and of his work with Danger Danger, so I thought I'd take a punt and shoot him a message asking whether he'd be interested in listening to our songs to potentially mix our album. After hearing the song 'Wrong Things Right' he was onboard just like that. Since then, we've all become great mates to the point we have been his backing band for his solo shows in Australia and in America. Paul is the complete opposite of a task master. He gets what we're trying to do and his input has been awesome. This time around we were fortunate enough to have Paul co-write three songs and sing a dual lead vocal, which is a huge buzz for us! The man obviously has an incredible voice but not many know what a complete musician the man is. He's a great engineer/mixer, keys player and an awesome guitar player!

What are your plans for the future?

We can't wait to begin touring this new album. October sees us play at October Fest here in Melbourne which is going to be unreal and in November we'll play our hometown album launch at the Cherry Bar on AC/DC Lane. 2016 is also gearing up to be really positive for us as we'll play in the UK for the first time at Hard Rock Hell AOR Fest and if all goes to plan some extra shows in London. We'll be back in the USA in October of next year for the Rock N Skull/Melodic Rock Fest. Our aim is to spread the word and continue promoting this new album. And we've already started to write some new demos!

DEF LEPPARD

It's been seven years since the release of their last record 'Songs From The Sparkle Lounge', but now Def Leppard are set to release their first ever self-titled album, easily the best thing they have recorded since the mighty 'Hysteria'. Joe Elliott, Phil Collen, Vivian Campbell, Rick 'Sav' Savage and Rick Allen have been touring throughout the U.S.A. but are now about to embark on a sold-out U.K. tour with Whitesnake and Black Star Riders. To celebrate their return Ant Heeks caught up with not only Phil Collen but also Vivian Campbell, to bring you an amazing, in-depth insight to Def Leppard the band, the album and the men behind it.

The first of the two guitarists in the hot seat, Phil Collen…

How's the tour going so far?

Awesome! We couldn't ask for anything more, we're playing to really big audiences, usually when the kids go back to school you see a real difference, we've got three or four sold out shows coming up in the next week. It's amazing, the reaction's fantastic.

Onto the new album, you all got together with the view of recording a three-track EP, next thing you know you've come up with your best album since 'Hysteria'! What happened?

Well basically, we didn't have anybody telling us what we had to do, which can give you Red Light Fever, people can go into the studio and just freeze up, and it's just not the best environment for being creative. I think what happened here, it's like The Rolling Stones, Bowie's done it, James Brown, all our favourite artists, they just write songs and record them and put them out. Probably in the Eighties you had the situation where the record label says "we need this" and the record company executive says "we need that", it creates a completely different type of product. We didn't have to do an album, in fact many bands these days don't because it's counter-productive, they don't really sell, the reason we did this record was because we had this music that we loved. From writing the songs and making the music, I think it's the truest Def Leppard album we've ever done.

This is the first album you have ever recorded without a record deal in place, do you think that gave you more freedom to experiment.

It totally did! It actually flowed a lot better, it didn't have that thing where you have to make the jigsaw puzzle fit, where you need a certain type of song or you need this and that. In a million years we would never have put this collection of songs together if we were tied to a label, the dynamic of it is completely different. That's just it in a nutshell really.

Have Def Leppard ever had a Record Label interfere and pressurize you into recording a specific type of album?

Not really, because we always had Mutt Lange producing. If we were getting bullied into anything he would just step in and say

"It was like being a band who is making their first album, you've got this collection of songs, you want to share it, you want to record it and that adds a different feel to it in a very artistic way."

Phil Collen on Def Leppard's new album

"get the fuck out of here, don't come and interfere with my band while we're trying to be creative". So we had that for sure. I just think that in the back of your head you're thinking "O.K., we've got to get this finished by a certain date, we've got deadlines, we've got schedules, is it gonna be right, are the fans gonna like it", where with this one we didn't have anything like that at all. It was like being a band who is making their first album, you've got this collection of songs, you want to share it, you want to record it and that adds a different feel to it in a very artistic way. Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, that's what they used to do, non-corporate and totally artistic. That's the difference right there, that's why we enjoyed doing it that way.

Have you followed the same guidelines as the '…Sparkle Lounge' album where you wrote the songs individually, or have there been more collaborations this time?

It depends, some songs were done that way. The great thing about this record is there were no rules, no strict guidelines or parameters – if you start having that parameter bullshit you get something that is more uptight. With this one certain songs work a certain way, other songs work in a different way, and that's really the way the whole thing came out. It was a very natural experience.

Where did the idea come from that you would all sing lead vocal parts on the song 'We Belong'?

It was Joe actually, he'd had this song sitting around, he first played it to us backstage as long as seven years ago, and then it came to fruition where suddenly we'd demoed it in less than a day, then it actually turned into a master and we thought it would sound really lovely if everybody sung a few lines on it.

What about 'Sea Of Love', there's a bit of a Glam Rock influence in there.

A little bit, the backing vocal thing which

is interesting, because me and Joe are big T-Rex and Bowie fans and all of that stuff, and we thought it would be great if we could get like a Black female type of voice on there singing these high parts. Obviously I'd been doing the Delta Deep album at the same time as we've been doing this Def Leppard tour and album, and Debbi Blackwell-Cook, who's just an amazing singer, actually helped out with all the backing vocals and sang those lines with Joe, she totally had the voice for it, it was perfect. It kind of reminds you of some of the earlier T-Rex stuff.

There is a lot of diversity throughout the album and I think a lot of the songs hark back to different periods of Def Leppard.

Yeah, I think so, and the great thing about it was that we didn't put any restrictions on that, because we've done stuff before where we go "we want it to sound like 'Hysteria'", but with this one it was totally wide-open, and it was great. Each song had a different flavour to it and it's definitely refreshing to be able to do something like that.

A song like 'Blind Faith' could have been on the 'Slang' record.

Yeah, it's funny how that came about. We started in February 2014, I was staying in Dublin in this little cottage, it was snowing, it was bloody horrible weather, I came to the studio and I had the melody and the guitar part, and I had to stop and record it on my phone. I got to the studio and said "play this" and that was the demo that started everything off, and everybody kind of pitched in with their ideas after that. We wanted to have this kind of Beatles-type thing in the middle with Cellos and stuff, very different. It was work in progress for the longest time, then Rick said "you had that demo about eight years ago, why don't you stick that on the end?" It almost sounds like a 'Freebird' type of ending, it just worked so perfectly. The whole album was very much that way, nearly every idea that anyone suggested kind of worked, just because we didn't have any kind of restrictions, I really think that was it.

Do you all still record together in the studio at the same time?

No, every song's different. Some songs, like 'Invincible', we actually went in and sat around, Rick played drums and we got the basis of the song from that. Some of the songs that we had demoed before, we went in and gave them the live treatment and recorded them like that, then did the overdubs over the top of the vibe of it. A song like 'Energize' is totally a studio song, we got a drum part down and added weird guitar parts that sound like violins, then we recorded a demo vocal that we ended up keeping, that became the whole thing. So every song's different, it was more fun doing it that way, it was less of a gruelling thing. The other great thing about it was that we did it over three different sessions, we started it in February 2014, went on tour with Kiss, then we went in and finished some songs off and took them to the next level in May that year, then we completely finished in February 2015, and then obviously Joe lives at the studio so we could just go in and do little bits, we would do some things on tour like go backstage and record backing vocals, Viv would come in and add guitars because he was away in hospital, so there were no hard, fast rules, anything that could make it work basically.

So why did you decide to simply call it 'Def Leppard'?

I came up with that, again I thought this album was about us, it wasn't us responding to what fans wanted, or the record label or anyone else, it was purely about us. And we'd never used that title before, so it seemed very apt to do that, especially because it seems to be coming less and less likely that bands put albums out. It seems to represent where we're at, I think.

Is it somehow signifying the closing of a chapter of the band, or even opening a new one?

I think opening, but the great thing is it could be either, I'm not quite sure what it is right now. Without putting too much deepness in it, it's just us saying this is where we are right now. It's certainly a new way of recording, it's Chapter One as far as I'm concerned. As far as records in general right now, the fact that you can stream records

now and all that stuff, it's kind of the end of the music industry in that respect, so it could also be the closing of that chapter at the same time. I think you're right, it could be a bit of both.

Quite a few of you have projects outside of Def Leppard, does this help invigorate new life into the band when you get back together?

I think so, I think it can actually influence it. Obviously Delta Deep is very different to what I do in Def Leppard, the guitar playing and singing is exactly the same, it's just what we do with it, it's usually one take and pure expression. With Def Leppard I have to think of another guitar player fitting in there, even when we do vocals I can't just do a scratchy third take vocal, I have to do it thirty times to do a vocal harmony, then thirty more times if you're doing a third part, then somebody else has got to sing it as well so you have to get it more precise. That adds something else when you get the Def Leppard choir sound, it's different in that respect, but having said that I do like the fact that you get inspired to write things when you go somewhere else when you're doing a different style of album with different musicians you normally wouldn't get to play with. It helps you be more creative, it opens up your arsenal where you get more influences to draw from. That makes you a better person, better musician, better everything. It just adds to the experience.

Do you ever write a song for another project then think "hang on, this could be a Def Leppard song"?

I did that with 'Sea Of Love' actually! I thought it was going to be a Delta Deep song, I played it to the guys and they thought it was great. I was doing it while we were doing the 'Def Leppard' album, I was out by Joe's pool doing it on my laptop, and Sav said "this is great, we could do this", so we did! It sounded amazing as soon as Joe started singing, ironically Debbi Blackwell-Cook sang on it as well so I got both at the same time!

You're on tour at the moment, do you think the three-band bill is the way to go these days?

On this tour it is, we're playing places we played on the 'Hysteria' and 'Pyromania' tours, we've just played The Shoreline in San Francisco to twenty thousand, eighteen thousand in St. Louis, seventeen thousand in Chicago, really crazy stuff! It's really working, Styx are better than they've ever been they've got more of an aggression to their playing which really suits what they do, Tesla are just killing it, they're sounding amazing. All three bands are singing their own vocals, you've got no Pro-Tools sessions or sampling or any of that stuff, so there's an integrity out there that a lot of people are picking up on, and people are just loving it. For these three bands right now it's definitely the way to go.

Is there any frustration that you only have a limited time slot for your set? You have quite a back catalogue…

No, you just make it work, it makes it more exciting. Even my favourite artists, like I went to see Prince a couple of years ago and it was brilliant, I was in there for about two hours, he went off, I thought "great, I'm off home now", then he came back on and played for another three hours! That's too much for me. We've done the shows, like when we did the Las Vegas residency and played the 'Hysteria' album and did all these deep cuts which was cool, but we couldn't do that at a regular show because people would get bored, they wouldn't know some of these songs and they might walk out. You've got to be mindful of that as well. I think it's fine to cram it into an hour and a half, you have to drop some songs, you obviously have to play the favourites, but it keeps you on your toes.

A lot of the new album will be great live though…

I think so, I think it's going to really work. We've been rehearsing 'Let's Go' and that sounds brilliant, as always whenever you do a new album you're always going to want to play it so you have to find a slot for the new songs and decide what's going to work live, we have no idea yet.

Although he is the newest member of Def Leppard, Vivian Campbell's tenure with the band has been some twenty-three years now. Though he is still very much a part of their current tour, unfortunately, due to his ongoing battle with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, Vivian's input into the new album has been very limited. However, that didn't deter Ant Heeks from seizing the opportunity to have a friendly chat with him.

How are you coping with your health issues at the moment?

I'm getting on grand thank-you, I'm doing a process called Immunotherapy. The Hodgkin's keeps coming back, I found out in late May when I got a scan that it was coming back again so the doctors wanted me to do radiation and stuff. That wasn't something I fancied for various reasons, but my wife did a little research and came across this process called Immunotherapy; it's a series of clinical trials that we're doing. It's had great results with Melanoma and certain types of Lung Cancer with this course of drugs. So I'm doing that now, there's very minimal side effects, it's lowered my thyroid a bit but there's nothing like Chemo, hair loss or intense nausea or anything like that. The hardest part of doing this course of treatment has been the scheduling and the travelling, I have to fly back to Los Angeles about every three weeks to get the fusion but I've managed to do that and I won't be

missing any more shows, either for the US tour or when we go overseas, it's all been carefully co-ordinated. I have to do crazy things like fly from Singapore to Los Angeles and get an infusion before flying to London before we start the Irish and U.K tour in December. It's a lot more travel but it's all do-able. It's the best possible outcome for me, you know? In terms of whether or not it's effective treatment, I won't really know that until December or January when I do a second set of scans; it takes a long time for them to determine the efficacy of the treatment. Hopefully it will be effective and if it is I'll be able to continue doing this for another couple of years.

So how does Hodgkin's affect you?

Well I actually had it for a few years and I didn't realise. I remember going back as far as 2011 thinking that there was something wrong with me, I kept repeatedly getting ill like every six weeks or four weeks or whatever, and it was always the same symptoms. I had this Flu-like thing going on and I'd see a doctor and they'd give me antibiotics, but it would keep coming back, it never really went away. And this was all accompanied by a cough that was just persistent, even when the other symptoms were gone I couldn't shake the cough; and then over a year or so the cough got much, much worse. I went to see different doctors, my regular doctor sent me to see a Respiratory Specialist, and to be honest the doctors just kinda dragged their heels on it. I kept feeling something was wrong and they kept giving me different inhalers and nasal sprays and stuff like that. Eventually after about a year of this I went back to the doctors and got them to do an X-ray. That didn't look too good so they sent me for some scans and Blood tests, I had all the symptoms of Hodgkin's Lymphoma which I've come to learn after the fact, things like night sweats, itching in my shins which believe it or not is a common symptom if it's persistent! So I had a tumour growing in my chest which was blocking my windpipe, every time I would exert in any way, even just having a conversation like this, I would end up coughing. It's amazing, one thing it's really taught me is you have to advocate your own health, even though doctors are smart and well educated, nobody knows your own health and your own body better than yourself.

How are you finding the constant touring?

I think it's the best thing for me! By a long shot. I couldn't imagine anything worse than having that taken away from me as a result of the illness, so a big, big part of this battle for me is and has always been the mental aspect of it, I refuse to capitulate to it. And I do think that you have to be able to go on with your life as much as possible when you're facing a disease like cancer. I think if you subscribe to that mindset of being sick you're going to go down that road a lot quicker. Life is short regardless of what your health is like, so you gotta live it, there's no point sitting around saying "I'll get on with my life when this is completed", you just have to get up and enjoy each and every day as it's given to you. So it's been a very, very big part of my dealing with it, just continuing with my work. It's been a long and difficult battle actually, persuading the rest of the guys in the band and in particular Def Leppard's management that this was doable for me, you know? Management look at it from a whole different perspective, they look at it as a business, there's a lot of money at stake. It's been difficult in that regard, but I think I've proven to the band that I'm more than capable of continuing doing the tour and doing my work, it's actually a good thing for both me and the band. We're very tight-knit, the band's been together for a lot of years, we've been through a lot of different adversities... this is just another one of those. Hey, does anyone notice the drummer's only got one arm, what's a little cancer! (laughs)

So how much of the excellent new album were you able to contribute to?

I've had very little actually, for various reasons, dealing with my health, dealing with a divorce from hell. It's kinda strange, it's a weird thing that in the 23 years I've been with Def Leppard this is, I think, the best record the band's made, but I've actually had very, very little to do with it – I think the Universe is trying to tell me something there! (laughs) Maybe I should just let them do it! But we did the record in three instalments over the course of a year at Joe's studio in Dublin, each instalment was about four to six weeks. The first one, we wanted to cover the Rock element – we're a very good live band dynamically but we never capture that in the studio, because we never play live in the studio; we always do Def Leppard records very slowly and methodically, it's always one guy at a time and you can't capture rock that way. So we decided we needed to go back and set up in the room and play in real time, all five of us at once, and it kind of worked. We hadn't done that since the 'Slang' record in the mid-nineties and there is just a very subtle push-pull thing that you get when you do it in real time. Then of course after that we take the track and add way too much stuff to it, like loads of guitar tracks, and we really polish it. It's never gonna sound like 'High 'n' Dry', the band doesn't necessarily record like that anymore but we did capture the energy of the original backing tracks, that was the easy part of the record. Then the whole middle section of the record I missed because I was dealing with health issues and I couldn't travel to Dublin, then I was back for the last session in January of this year, that's when things really came together, when final lyrics were done, final decisions made as to where to go with the songs, but I would hazard a guess that the middle section was where the really hard work was done and that was the one I missed. Fortunately! (laughs)

"I didn't have a great reputation because I'd been in Dio and been fired, I'd been in Whitesnake and been fired (laughs), I'd been in these other bands where it hadn't worked out, so Rick, Sav and Phil were like 'are you sure about this Joe?'"

Vivian Campbell on joining Def Leppard

Did you have any input into the writing?

Just a couple of co-writes. I am not actually very good at bringing songs into a band, any band. It's actually different with other bands because other bands actually get in a room and play and kind of create that way, but Leppard's never really done that, other than a little bit of that first session, but for me with Def Leppard, I've always had the most success at bringing my songs to them when they were fully realised demos, and I mean full-on ProTools demos with loads of backing tracks and overdubs, really polished complete tracks. Unfortunately I don't have a studio any more, I went through a horrible divorce which coincided with my spending years and thousands of dollars building a great studio, only to have to leave it behind. I've been gathering ideas for songs for years, but I didn't have any studio to record them, so I didn't go to the band with any really developed ideas. I'm just not the kind of person that can talk up a song, Joe and Phil can, they could sell ice to Eskimos, they can convince you they have this fantastic Number One hit song without actually playing you a note. They can talk about it with such enthusiasm and such vivid descriptions, at the end of ten minutes you become convinced that this song is an absolute hit, even though you've got no idea what it sounds like! I've just never been that kind of person, I can only present a song as a song, but I didn't have the ability to do that this time round, I'm kind of in a transitional phase in my life, so all my ideas remain undeveloped. I only got to contribute a couple of ideas in that first session when we were hands on and playing together and I could say "what about this?" That kind of is more my background.

I had my first album experience with 'Holy Diver' with Dio, and that record was written very much in a real-time environment. People didn't walk in with demos back then, you had an idea for a riff and you'd go in and play it with the drummer and bass player, that's how we wrote the 'Holy Diver' record. Vinny (Appice), Jimmy (Bain) and myself would get together an idea for a track, a verse, a bridge, a chorus, then we'd play it for Ronnie, he would make some suggestions and he'd write some lyrics, then away you go, you'd make a record. Leppard is totally different to that, not only

in the way songs are created but also in the context of what kinds of songs are chosen for the record. When Def Leppard makes a record we don't just look for ten, twelve or fourteen songs, it's very specific as to what kind of songs we need. It's always easy enough at the start, but then the middle part of making any Def Leppard record becomes a very intellectual, very analytical process about what kind of song we need next, then there's a lot of writing to order, it's not just a question of "so and so has a song, it's pretty good", if that particular song doesn't fit that prescribed bill of what the next song should be, it's going to be discarded. Inevitably we get to a stage where we need a specific kind of song, so what we normally do is start referencing that particular song that we want to write a song similar to and take mental notes as to what key it's in, the structure, the tempo, what the lyrics are concerned with, the overall aspects of the components that make up that song, then we basically try and reverse engineer it, with varied results. Sometimes it doesn't work and we scrap it, sometimes it actually works out; at first it may sound like a bit of a clone but within a day or two it morphs and takes on a life of its own and becomes a unique and separate Def Leppard song. It's a strange way of working I gotta admit, but it works for Def Leppard, and it always has.

So from your perspective do you think it's the best album since 'Hysteria'?

Probably yes, as a whole, it's probably the thing closest to it. It's a very diverse record, it touches on all the different styles that the band has been known for. There's the initial rock element, and although it's nowhere near as raw as 'High 'n' Dry', we did cover some basic rock songs to begin with. Then it goes through the more polished, pop orientated styles that the band became known for and successful with 'Hysteria', then it also goes in a couple of places where we haven't been before, the closing track 'Blind Faith' is actually psychedelic song, we've never done anything like that before. But it still sounds uniquely like Def Leppard, as does everything else on the record, because of the characteristic vocal sound that we have, the collective vocal sound. There's also a track that Joe wrote called 'We Belong', it's great because we all get to sing a couple of lines on lead vocal, that's the first time we've ever done anything like that. It's nice because we're known for our strong group vocals but it's a nice showcase to have each and every one of us take our brief turn at lead singer. So yeah, I would think it's probably the strongest record we've made since 'Hysteria'.

You've never been a stranger to being in successful bands like Dio and Whitesnake, but when you joined Def Leppard they were one of the biggest bands in the world at the time. What was that like for you?

It was a strange time. As you noted I'd been in and out of a few bands at that stage, and the last two in particular didn't go well. After Whitesnake I did a record with a band called Riverdogs that actually was a great record but it completely fell into the abyss, it just never got a chance to be heard. So I started wondering what I had to do to have a successful band or record, and because that record didn't happen for Riverdogs it led me to leave, I literally couldn't afford to stay in the band any more; I'd kinda been bankrolling parts of the band and paying my own mortgage for close to two years. So then I got offered this project with Lou Gramm, a supposed band called Shadow King, and that turned out to be a complete nightmare. We made a record with Keith Olsen producing, we did one show at The Astoria in London and then I quit because basically Lou was having a chronic problem with cocaine and couldn't show up for interviews and promotion – he actually wasn't there for the making of most of the record, the record just went in a whole new direction to what it was supposed to! So I'd just kinda had it with being in bands at that stage, so when Joe called me and asked me if I'd be interested about getting together and playing with Def Leppard!

Obviously I was very flattered and excited about the prospect of it, but I was also thinking, "Do I really want to go down this road again?" I'd been in and out of so many bands that for various reasons hadn't worked. At this stage I'd been working on developing my voice as a singer, I'd been writing with a bunch of successful co-writers and had amassed a bunch of songs. I'd been in the studio and cut demo tracks. I was still under contract to CBS Records as a result of the Riverdogs album, I was on the path to make a solo album and very happy about that, very content being the captain of my own ship. But it's not every day you get the chance to join a band like Def Leppard; not only were they as you noted one of the biggest bands in the world at that time, they were also a great, great band of which I had been a fan since day one. I remember going out and buying the picture sleeve 'Wasted' single back in the day, I had bought all the albums like 'On Through The Night', 'High 'n' Dry', 'Pyromania', I was intimately familiar with Def Leppard's work because I was quite literally a fan as well as a contemporary of theirs. 'Hysteria' I bought on cassette and CD because I played it so much the cassette started to sound shit, that was the perfect album for CD as well with the advent of that technology.

So yeah, obviously I wasn't going to turn that down but I think both myself and the other guys in the band, with the exception of Joe, kind of took it very cautiously, it wasn't an easy decision for either party. Joe knew me socially, Joe had lived in Dublin for many years, and being from Belfast I had a lot of mutual friends with him. We knew each other from various dinner parties, and when Joe would come to L.A. where I lived, he would call me up for a football game on a Sunday afternoon, so I knew him socially even though we'd never played music together. So he knew the kind of person that I am, whereas the other guys only knew me by reputation, and at this stage I didn't have a great reputation because I'd been in Dio and been fired, I'd been in Whitesnake and been fired (laughs), I'd been in these other bands where it hadn't worked out, so Rick, Sav and Phil were like "are you sure about this Joe?" So we basically had a two or three month courtship, we got together and we played music in a rehearsal room, that sounded great, there was no problem there, they knew I could play guitar but what was a surprise was that I could sing so well, that was a big plus. We got to know each other so the decision was made, I guess for the first year or so when I was with the band on the 'Adrenalize' tour I was strictly speaking an employee, then about two thirds of the way through that tour Joe came to me and said "we're tearing up your employment contract, you're officially twenty percent of the band". I guess it's worked out, twenty-three years later… it's been my most successful band I've been in, just in terms of making it work and making it stick, it's been a great ride!

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ALBUM REVIEWS

FIREWORKS GUIDE TO WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT...

DEF LEPPARD
'DEF LEPPARD'
(earMUSIC) **ROCK**
Reviewed by Ant Heeks

Def Leppard are one of the few bands that have an instantly recognizable signature sound that you can't mistake, no matter which era of the band any particular song may originate from. From the ground-breaking, technical excellence of 'Hysteria', the darker, moodier 'Slang' record that they rode out the Grunge storm with and the more contemporary-sounding 'X' album – even on the 'Yeah!' covers album they managed to sound uncannily like the band they were covering whilst also retaining their own identity.

And so 'Def Leppard', recorded without any record label pressure or interference, sees them integrating many different elements and styles from their past into one cohesive and fresh sounding album. The band sounds invigorated, Joe Elliott is singing better than ever, the production is immense, and as for the songs…

Opener 'Let's Go' is an absolute classic 'Hysteria'-era Leppard; big drums, big guitars, big harmonies – it may be a little structurally similar to 'Pour Some Sugar On Me', but who cares? 'Dangerous' that follows is an awesome 'Euphoria'-ish up-tempo ultra-melodic Rocker, while the bass-driven, Funky 'Man Enough' somehow manages to sound like a 'Yeah!' seventies-cover; there are elements of Queen circa 'The Game' here – great fun.

'X' would be the contemporary-sounding reference point for the classy ballad 'We Belong' (that features all band members singing lead vocal lines for the first time), the excellent driving Rocker 'Invincible' and the heavily-programmed 'Energized', while the fun-sounding 'Sea Of Love' and 'Forever Young' continue the no-frills approach from the 'Songs From The Sparkle Lounge' album. The Hard Rocking, guitar-driven 'All Time High' and 'Broke 'N' Brokenhearted' nod back to the 'High 'N' Dry' and 'Pyromania' days, albeit with a more modern sheen.

Sounding quite unlike anything that DL have recorded before is the wonderful 'Battle Of My Own' that sees the band go all Led Zeppelin on us (Lep Zeppelin?), initially acoustic-led until the power-chords crash in, accompanied by string effects, while the beautiful, serene ballad 'Last Dance' has an almost Folky element to it, a feature that harks back to some of the 'Retroactive' tracks.

As the album draws to its conclusion it takes a turn towards a somewhat moodier direction with the Modern Rocker 'Wings Of An Angel' and the introspective and somewhat Psychedelic ballad 'Blind Faith' that could have fitted comfortably on 'Slang'.

'Hysteria' is rightly regarded as one of the greatest Rock albums of all time, so is 'Def Leppard' the best thing they have done since that landmark record? I've got my opinion, over to you…

QUEENSRYCHE
'CONDITION HUMAN'
(Century Media) **PROGRESSIVE**
Reviewed by Phil Ashcroft

The subject of one of the most ridiculous soap operas in music history, the newly-empowered sole owners of the Queensryche name choose wisely when they picked Crimson Glory singer Todd LaTorre to replace sacked front-man Geoff Tate.

After many years of (allegedly) unreasonable behaviour and a downward spiral of forgettable, badly-received releases, the blame has been largely laid at Tate's feet, but perhaps the early euphoria that Queensryche sounded like themselves again on the 2013 self-titled album actually glossed over the fact that not all of that album was particularly memorable. The good news is that 'Condition Human' is better, MUCH better!

Again the band have gone back to the glory days for inspiration and have taken their time crafting an album that celebrates what fans loved about the band, but at the same time they're forging a new path that keeps them fresh and urgent. By now you've probably already heard the Rocking opener 'Arrow Of Time' and the darker, more sinister 'Guardian', and whilst they've already been lauded as a return to form, they're really just a small part of an impressive whole.

LaTorre has really come into his own this time out, imbuing the songs with Tate's sense of drama and his own grittier edge, the moody and melodic 'Hellfire', the dark and Doomy verse and memorable chorus of 'Selfish Lives' and the modern vibe of the heavier 'Hourglass' showing his versatility as Michael Wilton and Parker Lundgren craft dual riffs over Eddie Jackson's booming bass and Scott Rockenfield's return to truly Progressive percussion.

'Toxic Remedy' manages to be technical but catchy, 'All There Was' is a great, high-speed Rocker and the curiously named 'Eye9' mixes tricky riffs, epic vocal lines and gorgeous twin guitar harmonies to great effect.

If you're waiting for the "but…", it's not going to come because all that's left to mention – apart from the atmospheric intro 'The Aftermath' – are the brilliant 'Just Us', a gentler melodic masterpiece with a devastating LaTorre vocal that builds to a heart-stopping crescendo. It's like 'Silent Lucidity' but more varied, whereas the title track, all eight minutes of it, has epic time changes, trademark sound effects, brilliant musicianship and an impassioned vocal; think 'Roads To Madness' meets 'Suite Sister Mary' (LaTorre's words but pretty descriptive!)

Produced by big Queensryche fan Chris 'Zeuss' Harris (Rob Zombie, Shadows Fall etc.), 'Condition Human' is a fresh take on classic Queensryche and one that leaves their previous album trailing in its wake.

If there's any justice a resurgence of their popularity should be imminent.

W.A.S.P.
'GOLGOTHA'
(Napalm) **HEAVY METAL**
Reviewed by Ant Heeks

Truth be told, I haven't listened to W.A.S.P. in years, not since the release of 'The Crimson Idol' all the way back in 1992. Not for any particular reason, they just faded out of my perspective as mainstream music became harder to find during the "Grunge years". So when 'Golgotha' drooped into my inbox I decided, more out of nostalgia than anything, that I'd give it the once-over – and I'm so glad I did! As I have no knowledge of their recent output I have nothing to make comparisons to, enabling me to listen with a completely open mind – and ultimately conclude that it's awesome!

The opening, ultra-melodic salvo of 'Scream', 'Last Runaway' and 'Shotgun' is as good an opening trio of songs you're as likely to hear on any release this year, with the energetic '…Runaway' a strong contender for Song Of The Year with its soaring melodies and anthemic chorus – serious radio airplay surely beckons.

The album takes a darker turn at track four with the superb, lengthy power-ballad 'Miss You' (a track originally written for the '…Idol' album) with Blackie Lawless digging deep to wrench out a wonderfully tortured, emotional vocal, while the twin extended guitar solos from Doug Blair are a joy to behold and serve to augment the powerful, emotional lyrics.

From thereon in, the album continues in the somewhat darker vein, yet as the excellent 'Fallen Under' demonstrates it's definitely no less melodic. The album's second epic number is 'Slaves Of The New World Order', the varying musical passages and numerous (occasionally rampant) time changes giving it a definite 'Chainsaw Charlie' classic feel. 'Eyes Of My Maker' has the feel of old-school Metal while having a wonderful Progressive-tinged instrumental breakdown and another emotional Lawless vocal, then 'Hero Of The World' bears hallmarks of classic The Who – a road W.A.S.P. have driven before.

The album concludes with its piece de resistance title track, 'Golgotha' is another intense, emotionally epic power ballad whose lyrical inspiration is the very culmination of Lawless' religious beliefs since he became a born-again Christian, the title referring to the site where Jesus was crucified.

I find it incredulous that W.A.S.P. have somehow managed to retain their original signature sound while managing to incorporate more mature, thought-provoking lyrics that revolve around Blackie's faith, a far cry from their eighties output. I'm positive that long-term seasoned W.A.S.P. fans will absolutely love this album, I believe it can sit proudly alongside the 'Headless Children' and '…Idol' opuses. Me, I'm clearing a space under "W" in my CD collection to invest in their back catalogue to see what I've been missing all these years! Thoroughly recommended.

'77 – 'NOTHING'S GONNA STOP US' *(Century Media)* HARD ROCK

Pronounced "seventy-seven", a name which conveys exactly what the band are about. Call it, if you will, going back to the future. Indeed, given the choice, perhaps 1977 is where Michael J Fox should have pointed his DeLorean and sampled Rock at its finest and most splendid, when denim, leather and grease ruled rather than the hairspray and spandex which soon followed.

Rooted in the sound of what many consider the golden age of Heavy Rock, the Valeta brothers (Armand (vocals/rhythm guitar) and lead guitarist LG) are joined by a new rhythm section of Andy Cobo on drums and bassist Guillem Martinez – their audition including a telling try out of AC/DC covers and the Australia legends are a band who provide much of this album's inspiration which, at times, is hard to shake off.

It's raw and uncluttered; short, sharp and to the point, even with the standard lead and rhythm guitar of the Valeta pairing plus bass and drum combo, and to their credit they've done their utmost to bring some authenticity to the songs. Producer, Jaime Gomez Arellan confirmed that "we decided to take our trip back in time very seriously and didn't compromise on anything". Meaning, the album was recorded live – no more than two takes per song – using vintage equipment, classic analogue units and capturing it all on analogue two inch tape. You can just imagine Bolton's finest comedian Peter Kay shouting "Analogue tape? Analogue? Tape?" While some readers who were actually around in 1977 might take offence at the "vintage" reference, looking at the equipment list it's a vintage gear enthusiast's wet dream.

As far as the music and the songs are concerned, the difficulty remains in the feeling that there's the constant reference to and reminders of other bands which may be a good or bad thing. 'Tonight' has that distinctive AC/DC groove with some swing and 'She Makes Me' similarly sets off with a throaty vocal very much in the style of…well, you get the picture. The twin guitar sound of the title track is very much along the lines of the sound pioneered by (insert the name of your favourite seventies twin guitar band here). Even the closing cut 'We Want More Rock And Roll' kicks off with what is clearly "that" distinctive John Bonham signature drum opening of Led Zeppelin's 'Rock And Roll'. On the other hand, when they produce something like 'It's Alright', a pacey feel-good party tune, or go a bit darker in 'Too Young To Go' they show more of their own identity rather than reiterating their influences.

And therein lies the rub. In a nutshell, an idea which is executed nicely with some reservations about the material.

Mike Ainscoe

21OCTAYNE – '2.0' *(AFM)* HARD ROCK

When a new band appears on the scene with such a strong debut as 21Octayne did with 'Into The Open', the so-called "difficult second album syndrome" can arise. Have the band managed to deliver an equally strong follow-up?

The highly-skilled German band have tried to achieve this. Initially, I found the album title a bit lame but having had the chance to speak to guitar-virtuoso Marco Wriedt I realized that there's much more to this record than first impressions suggest and that it's different from its predecessor. '2.0' opens with the single-release 'Devil In Disguise' which comes along as a decent, groovy, upbeat Rocker and starts the album quite strongly. 'Take Me Back' and 'Love's Just A Heartbreak Away' are very catchy without any massive surprises but still quite some cool licks, breaks and even some Progressive elements. The choruses go straight into one's head, the solos are brilliant and show off the guitar skills of 21Octayne's musical mastermind. 'Take Me Away' features quite a Progressive and much darker sound, while the song-writing and the solo (which reminded me of some old Yes classics) are less predictable and very refreshing. Yes, they still can!

I am also struck with the thought that songs such as 'When You Go' and the sublime Rock ballad 'Lost' (my favourite on the album) show the band as a more innovative Alter Bridge... 'Fly With Me' and 'Tale Of A Broken Child' are exceptional, the latter a ten minute epic Progressive Rock masterpiece. Here the trio (all of them!) demonstrate their finely maturing skills. That one is simply breathtaking and undoubtedly one of the songs of 2015.

As a conclusion I have to remark that '2.0' can't really be compared with '…Open', as there has been a huge leap forward in the song-writing and range of styles presented here. They've matured to appeal to a wider range of taste and thus a slightly different audience.

Unfortunately as regards the sound, the mix is definitely weaker than on the debut as the drum sound is very tinny and "trebly" and the guitars and vocals could be clearer. But nevertheless, the album is a fine, sophisticated and well-written Modern Rock release. Hagan Grohe, Wriedt and Alex Landenburg are showing a more "radio friendly" face this time but they surely haven't lost their authenticity. Apart from the last two songs, we mainly find rather modern, love-related songs without the rough edges and the experimental elements which made the band so very special before.

So "radio friendliness" with top-class quality... I'd say this is a very good follow-up that deserves your attention.

Julia Braun

3RDEGREE – 'ONES & ZEROS: VOLUME 1' *(10t)* PROGRESSIVE

The third album in the 3RDegree comeback finds them tackling the dark concept of what may happen when we allow technology to be such an integral part of our lives, that it becomes almost impossible to decide where the tech starts and the person ends. Brain upgrade anyone?

A "jingle" opens the album, introducing us to Valhalla Tech, a "company" which will take our hand and guide us through the "brave new world" of internal human artificial intelligence, devices which dictate exactly what we can and can't do and how death is reduced to an "application" rather than an occurrence to be mourned. That this band choose to relay these thoughts through sounds which beguile and seduce in the most uplifting of fashions can seem strangely at odds with the lyrical ethos and yet what it signifies is how easily and wilfully we seem to simply and inanely pass more and more responsibilities on to machines and devices.

'Life' is a great example of where this album comes from, a sparse arrangement punctuated by choir-like vocals (all from the band) as a strummed guitar line carries us along on the crest of a sumptuous melody. At times the Fusion of Steely Dan is brought to mind, 'Circuit Court' darting on an organ pulse and Jazzy vocals, while 'Life At Any Cost' leaves no doubt that we're dealing with a Prog band adept at Poppy hooks and melodies in a way few can master.

A mash of quirky latter day Queen and a restrained Dream Theater suddenly pops up in 'What It Means To Be Human', a song which, while nodding at classic acts, sounds like no one else could, while 'We Regret To Inform You' is a fine example of how to bring the spoken word right into the heart of a song, the concept interwoven expertly throughout the entire album.

With 'Ones & Zeros' 3RDegree have produced an album that so captures exactly what this band is all about, that I have no hesitation in saying it's the most complete they've produced to date and one capable of rivalling the best Prog 2015 will throw at us.

Steven Reid

42 DECIBEL – 'ROLLING IN TOWN' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* HARD ROCK

It will come as no surprise to find that 42 Decibel, a four-piece band from Caballito (a barrio of the Argentine capital, Buenos Aires) are purveyors of Classic Hard Rock in the vein of AC/DC. 'Rolling In Town' is the sophomore album and continues the style that is unashamedly seventies Hard Rock.

The main reasons for the AC/DC comparisons are Junior Figueroa's raspy vocals that are akin to the late, great Bon Scott. Figueroa not only takes lead vocals but also lead guitar duties ably supported by Billy Bob Riley on rhythm and slide guitar, newest member Matt Fraga on bass and original founding member Nicko Cambiasso on drums.

Album opener 'Can't Keep Control' races out of the traps full of aggression and attitude, followed by 'Short Fused' that is the sort of dirty Rock 'n' Roll that most of us Hard Rock fans know and love. 'Rude And Fast' is a no-nonsense, foot-to-the-floor Hard Rocker similar to Accept's classic 'Breaker'. The first song dedicated to drinking is 'Drop Of Booze'. Riley's slide guitar features heavily on 'Burning Down The Road' complete with a Southern-style riff from Figueroa.

'Eye Of The Hawk' with its tasty riff and equally glorious guitar solo is reminiscent of bands like Rose Tattoo, Rhino Bucket and Junkyard. The second drinking song to feature is the "tongue in cheek" 'Down The Hatch' that has a very Aussie feel to it and is probably the closest in style to the band's 2013 debut album 'Hard Rock 'N' Roll'.

The band has released the foot-stomping 'Midnight Teaser (Evil Woman)' as the first video single and it perfectly sums up what 42 Decibel are all about. The Western-inspired 'Cold Steel Rider' clocks in at seven minutes and is made all that more impressive when you discover it was completed in one-take in the studio; the vocals do not even start until just under three minutes in. The album concludes with the very laid-back Blues of 'Smooth Talker'.

'Rolling In Town' was written, recorded, produced and mixed by the band themselves and is tried and trusted, straight down the line, Rock 'n' Roll but where I personally think they score above their Antipodean cousins, Airbourne, is their ability to vary the pace.

'Let There Be Rock' indeed...

Mark Donnelly

A COURSE OF ACTION – 'TREASON' *(Star 1)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

North Carolina quartet A Course Of Action consists of Jonathan Byrd (guitar), John Culberson (vocals), JT Silvestri (drums) and Wes Johnson (bass). In 2014 they played both the Rocklahoma Festival and the main stage at Sturgis. 'Treason' is the band's sophomore release, following their debut album 'Dark Before The Dawn', and initial work began on song creation and recording with well-known producer Beau Hill. The website bio states that

BERNIE TORME – 'BLACKHEART' *(Retrowrek)* HARD ROCK

After last year's 'Flowers And Dirt', Bernie Torme's first solo album for fifteen years, he's back via the power of Pledge.com with 'Blackheart', this time within fifteen months rather than years. With over forty years in the business the Torme style is pretty well defined and there's no real surprises here, just an album packed with classic Blues-based Rock 'n' Roll, a touch of Jimi Hendrix-influenced Psychedelia, all laced with Torme's trademark Strat wails and unique lead work.

'Golden Pig' kicks off, an energetic up-tempo Rocker and a perfect showcase of the all action rhythm and lead style. I don't think it's been on a studio album, but having featured on 2001's 'Scorched Earth – Live' release it sounds like a certainty for the forthcoming tour. This and indeed the next four tracks '1985 (Keeper Of The Flame), 'On Fire', 'Better Days' and 'Snake In The Garden' all reflect the classic, Hard Rocking part of the Torme experience. No Torme album though would be complete with a couple of slower ballad types, atmospheric rhythms being picked out showing Torme's love of 1960's Psychedelic Rock with 'Flow' and 'Into The Sun'; 'Flow' in particular building to a stunning Bluesy guitar solo.

Chris Heilmann on bass and Ian Harris on drums again make up a solid rhythm section, giving Torme the freedom to weave his own unique sound throughout. And if there was to be any quibble regarding 'Blackheart' it can only be that it is the quintessential Torme album. For fans who follow his work you get exactly what you would expect. This is raw, seemingly recorded pretty much live in the studio with minimal overdubs. Admittedly I'm a fan of his music for over thirty years, but I still want to be surprised by something a bit adventurous from time to time.

That said, even I can't argue with the quality of the songs on display here. 'Blackheart' benefits from being a single twelve track album compared to last year's double release. Not that '…Dirt' was packed with fillers, but this just seems a bit more cohesive and structured in terms of pacing and running order. There's a bit more Rock 'n' Roll with 'Pain Song' and 'Dirt' along with some traditional Blues provided by the steel slide guitar of 'Steady Roller Blues'. The album bows out with 'Party's Over' with its harmonica intro and evocative guitar solo to close.

If you know Bernie Torme's music 'Blackheart' is a great album that will meet all your expectations. If you don't, it's the perfect example of what he's about. You get what you pay for, so with 'Blackheart' financed by the fans and made for the fans, it delivers on every level.

Ian Parry

musical influences include Alice In Chains, Tool, Sevendust and Alter Bridge, but to my ears the sound on 'Treason' is a slightly more commercial brand of Modern Rock.

The down-tuned guitars of opener '107' form the basis of the song but Culberson's vocals are too understated to inspire the interest levels. 'Beautiful' has more urgency and the hook has more impact and, in my opinion, would have been a better way to start the release. The stop/start riffs indicate a confident writing ethic and demonstrate the band's knack for creating something more than just a verse/chorus/verse/chorus structure.

The beginning of 'Hate For Love' has an AB vibe but ACOA's identity remains intact as the song progresses. It is also the first time we get to hear a guitar solo of note. 'Who We Are' contains some nice acoustic subtleties and these contrast nicely with the bigger and more powerful guitar passages. One or two songs fall into the "mid-album blandness" category and fail to resonate due to inferior melodies and a failure to build on the main essence of the song.

The performances are still of a high quality and in fact give some of the weaker material a lift. At times the mix seems on the muddy side but overall the production values are rather good. 'One Last Time' stands out towards the end of the album and matches great musical ideas with impressive musicianship.

Bands such as A Course Of Action (who have a low recording profile) always benefit from the exposure gained touring with a big name act and I hope that is the case this time round as the material contained on 'Treason' deserves to be heard by a wider audience.

Dave Bott

ABSOLVA – 'NEVER A GOOD DAY TO DIE' *(Rocksector)* HEAVY METAL

Possibly the most consistent exponents of U.K. Metal in recent years, outside of the big boys likes Saxon and Iron Maiden, Absolva return with album number three, 'Never A Good Day To Die', with no sign of any drop in quality. It's a simple formula of taking great songs in the vein of latter day Saxon, adding a more contemporary edge and hammering them out with utter conviction and boundless energy.

When you can then call on the vocal guile of Chris Appleton, there's simply not a chink to find in the Absolva armour. Freed up from his bass duties (as Iced Earth take a well-deserved break), Luke Appleton not only has a strong hand in the construction of these songs, he's also the band's current co-guitarist alongside as his brother. Hence with the mighty thunder of Martin McNee still providing the earth-shaking percussive power we know and love, we now (in a fashion) have the pre-Absolva trio Fury UK back together, with bassist Karl Schramm completing the line-up.

Consisting of eleven songs and just over fifty-five minutes of music, that 'Never A Good Day To Die' never even threatens to tail off at any point is testament to how far this ever impressive band have come. Previewed on their recent live dates, 'No One Escapes' is set to continue its status as crowd pleaser and air puncher, with the scything swipe of the album's title cut just as bewitching.

However with tracks such as 'Killer Within', 'No Tomorrow' and 'Orphan Of God' arriving with such a memorable force and mature edge, words like "promise" and "potential" can now be completely cast aside as Absolva deliver a set of songs capable of rivalling even the top dogs of this genre.

With countless European outfits garnering critical acclaim and jealous looks, it's somehow satisfying to know that the country who gave the world this style of music in the first place, can still come up with bands of the calibre of Absolva.

Steven Reid

AMBERIAN DAWN – 'INNUENDO' *(Napalm)* SYMPHONIC METAL

Sophisticated and supremely melodic Symphonic Metal from Finland (wish we could bottle what those buggers have clearly been putting in the water for the past few years!), Amberian Dawn have been wowing European audiences for the best part of a decade now, yet for some curious reason their profile in the U.K. remains stubbornly low key. Given the popularity of other, in some instances less meritorious, Female-Fronted bands that strikes me as increasingly odd, but hey that's the fickle nature of this ramshackle business I guess.

'Innuendo' is their sixth full-length studio album if you exclude 2013's re-recorded 'Re-Evolution' set, and for anyone inquisitive enough to wonder what this jaded old hack is babbling on about, it serves as a very good introduction to the band. Blending together Classical themes, bombastic arrangements, svelte vocals and a rapier like hint of Metallic zeal, the AD sound draws upon a bountiful well of influences that includes anyone from Sonata Arctica to Mozart, Edenbridge to Handel, Nightwish to Bach…

Light and breathy one minute, melodramatic and urgent the next, 'Innuendo' (like all its predecessors) marks a calculated step forward for the band as they soak up more ideas and integrate them into the AD sound. The fragile beauty of 'Angelique' for example could quite easily have emanated from the pen of Andrew Lloyd Webber, whilst the galloping 'Rise Of The Evil' is a resolutely Neo-Classical romp through Stratovarius/SA territory (with a touch of Nightwish).

"New" vocalist Päivi "Capri" Virkkunen builds upon the solid start she made on her 2014 debut 'Magic Forest'… indeed, the biggest compliment to her (I think) is that you don't really miss her predecessor Heidi Parviainen, so seamlessly has she slotted into the AD set-up. The band sound as assured and adept as ever, the musical collage they've created perhaps their most ambitious and diverse sounding to date without ever losing the core appeal of what they band is all about.

Song-wise the album ebbs and flows as you'd expect (more often than not within the context of one song), dramatic peaks like 'Fame & Gloria' or 'Chamber Of Dreadful Dreams' contrasting well with brooding mini epics such as 'Your Time – My Time'… jeez, if only Yngwie Malmsteen still had the inclination to come up with classical refrains as strong as that!

A closely guarded secret for far too long, it's time Amberian Dawn had a serious profile hike in the U.K., and to these ears, 'Innuendo' is the album to do it!

Dave Cockett

ANDERSONPONTY BAND – 'BETTER LATE THAN NEVER' *(earMUSIC)* PROGRESSIVE

Ex-Yes front-man Jon Anderson should require no introduction to our readers; however Jean Luc Ponty may not be so familiar, admittedly I've not heard any of his music. Ponty is a pioneer and undisputed master of the violin in the arena of Jazz and Rock. He is widely regarded as an innovator who has applied his unique visionary spin that has expanded the vocabulary of modern music for almost fifty years.

BILLY SHERWOOD – 'CITIZEN' *(Frontiers)* ROCK

Billy Sherwood is a busy man; he's just released his eighth solo album 'Citizen' containing eleven tracks and clocking in at seventy minutes. He sings lead vocals on eight tracks as well as playing lead and bass guitar, drums, keyboards and harmonica, singing backing vocals and did I forget to mention he produced the album! Sherwood has also assembled a "who's who" of Prog giants. There are several current Yes and several ex-Yes alumni as well as Steve Hackett, Jordan Rudess, Steve Morse and Alan Parsons to name but a few.

'Citizen' is a concept piece based around "a lost soul reincarnated into various periods of history, he is the citizen..." The songs describe the individual experiences through his own eyes; a conscript legionnaire in the Roman Army at the end of the Empire, a trench runner in WW1, a friend to Galileo as he discovers the Earth is not flat, a distraught Wall Street man stepping out onto the ledge...a casualty of the great depression, assistant to Charles Darwin as he discovers his Theory to name just some of the historical reference points. It is an ambitious album which is very well written – Sherwood has plenty of experience (he was a member of World Trade, he's played with Yes and has just rejoined them at the request of the late great Chris Squire just before his untimely death. He is still an active member of Circa which includes Tony Kaye).

The opening title track has Squire's booming bass all over it and a trademark Kaye keyboard solo. 'Man And The Machine' is an up-tempo number with great harmonies from Sherwood and a stunning Hackett guitar solo. 'Just Galileo And Me' features Colin Moulding (ex XTC) on lead vocals and he sounds remarkably like Peter Gabriel on what is a slower number with Sherwood adding harmonica to his remarkable repertoire! 'No Man's Land' has Sherwood singing through a vocoder and Morse adds a couple of nifty guitar solos.

'The Great Depression' at just over eight and a half minutes is the album's longest track; Rick Wakeman plays some haunting grand piano and keyboards. As the song builds up momentum, Sherwood moves from acoustic guitar to electric and shows his proficiency with some impressive soloing. 'Empire' has Parsons taking the microphone and has some fine violin courtesy of the Mahavishnu Orchestra's Jerry Goodman. 'Age Of The Atom' is a catchy number and Sherwood plays some great bass.

Fans of WT, Circa and Yes will love this album as it contains all the hallmarks that Billy Sherwood is synonymous with; clever song-writing, great harmonies and superb musicianship. I'm sure most Prog listeners will also find something to entice them.

Az Chaudhry

In September last year the APB gave a special live performance at the Wheeler Opera House in Aspen, Colorado. The show was filmed and recorded and 'Better Late Than Never' is the result; a new studio album taken from the live performance which, according to the press release, has been enhanced with innovative production.

'One In The Rhythm Of Hope' is a strong opener, Anderson's vocals sound better than they have done during the last few years, guitarist Jamie Glaser adds some nice chops and Ponty's violin is everywhere. 'A For Aria' is a slower number awash with keyboards and dominated by violin once again. 'Owner Of A Lonely Heart' is pretty similar to Yes' version, apart from Trevor Rabin's guitar being replaced by violin. I'm sure the audience enjoyed this one, I certainly did!

'Listening With Me' is a re-working of Ponty's 'Stay With Me' to which Anderson has added lyrics and it's a decent mid-paced number which grows on you with repeated plays. Yes' thirty-five year old 'Time And A Word' is up next and has been "Reggaefied"; it sounds very much like Sting's take on The Police's 'The Bed's Too Big Without You' and includes a great solo from Glaser; Anderson even sings a snippet of The Beatles' 'She Loves You'.

'Infinite Mirage' is another Ponty song (Mirage) to which Anderson has added lyrics and it features fine drumming from Rayford Griffin and, of course, wonderful violin once again. Yes classics 'Wonderous Stories' and 'And You And I' are next up to be given the Ponty treatment and come across very well.

'Renaissance Of The Sun' is another Ponty number and is very reminiscent of Sting's solo work – very Jazzy and a real grower. 'Roundabout' I'm sure had all the fans on their feet; it is quite Rocky and upbeat and does the original justice with a lovely violin solo from Ponty. 'I See You Messenger' is an extremely catchy tune and difficult to get out of your head after several spins.

This album may not be everybody's cup of tea but Yes diehards will definitely find something of interest. A deluxe edition includes a DVD featuring footage from the show and interviews.

Az Chaudhry

APOGEE – 'THE ART OF MIND' *(Progressive Promotion)* PROGRESSSIVE

Apogee is the domain of multi-instrumentalist and song-writer, Arne Schäfer (who is joined here by drummer/percussionist, Eberhard Graef) and is apparently his well-established side project from his usual band, Versus X; albeit this is my first encounter with either of those. This is Apogee's eighth album since 1995 and consists of five tracks and in today's world of lengthy releases clocks in at a relatively lowly fifty-six minutes.

As the promotional blurb invariably does, it hypes up the album with the claim that together Schäfer and Graef have revived the typical characteristics and qualities of the Classic Prog Rock and then lists the usual suspect bands. I have to take issue with that because Apogee is a long way short of Genesis, Yes, Jethro Tull etc. If anything they sit in the Neo-Prog world.

Musically it's very accomplished and really rather pleasant, however, there's a fly in the ointment which I have no doubt will split listeners into two camps, or at best three (giving room for a few fence-sitters) and that's Schäfer's vocals, which to my ears are dull and lifeless thus doing an injustice to his undoubted prowess as a composer. There have been many similar examples down the years; look at Bob Dylan, he's written many a great song but can't sing them for toffee – pretty much anyone sings his songs better than he does.

It begs the question why the artist can't hear this for themselves? In such situations I find myself thinking "why don't you get a proper singer in?"

As I listened to this album a comparison immediately popped into my head, that of The Tangent both musically and vocally. The more I listen the more the similarity appears cogent; although Andy Tillison has a slightly more expressive voice (on record anyway). There's also the sort of idiosyncratic Peter Hammill (Van Der Graaf Generator) quality to his vocals which will probably prove to be a Marmite factor.

With either a decent singer or as an instrumental album I think I'd really enjoy this album, but as it stands it doesn't pass muster and that's probably why the band has never crossed my radar before. Compared to all the superb albums that have been released thus far this year in the Prog genre, I'm afraid this pales by comparison.

Definitely a case of an album you need to hear before you buy. You never know, it might just float your boat.

Gary Marshall

ARON SCOTT – 'EARTHQUAKE' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

This release takes you back to the 1970s when Guitar Rock was the soundtrack to the American dream. Don't be fooled by the Photoshopped album sleeve or the Eddie Van Halen hinted suggestion (in the record's title) of 'Eruption', this big man from the U.S. is like Ted Nugent without the dodgy politics.

Put a bit of Rick Derringer, Pat Travers and Black Oak Arkansas through a mincer and you've got a fist full of songs fit for a road trip. On his website his bio simply states "Born. Learned how to Rock out. Still Rockin' out" which might be all you need to understand about the directness of the man and his music.

There are big meaty riffs at every turn and his vocals, while not going to win any awards, are big and robust enough to complement the music. It's a simple template but Scott puts enough of a different spin on it each time to make this a thoroughly satisfying disc.

Opener 'Sunshine And Rock 'N' Roll' shocks and awes like Nugent but the next song 'Gimme Little Kiss' has that prime time, good time feel of Kiss inviting you to party with Scott (vocally closer to Gene Simmons than Paul Stanley).

He throws a Psychedelic curve ball on 'Cosmic Hog' and shows he can get Funky with the bass heavy 'No Mercy'. 'Blood Pudding' is a classic driving Rocker and 'Rock 'N' Roll' is like Bachman Turner Overdrive and mid-1970's Canned Heat jamming. Late in the game 'Freewheel' unleashes one of his best solos.

The production reminds you this is a modern recording and has enough oomph to make your house shake. Scott also has a tattoo parlour and by the time the disc ends with 'Rock 'N' Roll Dogs' you'll feel like a Rock 'n' Roll dog yourself in need of an Aron Scott tattoo across your arm.

Duncan Jamieson

ART NATION – 'REVOLUTION' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

They say that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery". If I am honest I think it's fair to say that Art Nation, another band from that factory in Sweden where the conveyor belt that makes Melodic Hard Rock acts by the hour never stops running, sound a lot like H.e.a.t (and I do mean a lot).

Now after living with this Gothenburg-based band's album for many weeks, I don't see a problem with this at all because the music is full of hooks so strong they could punch a hole in a wall, so that sounding a bit (sic) like another band just pales into insignificance. The litmus test however will be what the fans of this type of Melodic Hard Rock really think of the songs AN have come up with on 'Revolution'.

Therefore I'd like to steer you in the direction of such superb Melodic Rock gems as '3000 Beats' to name but one and a track which I personally think is one of the AOR songs of 2015. Hooks to die for, a melody line that kills and musicianship of the highest calibre, plus meaningful lyrics about domestic abuse, all make you want to have this track on continual replay but if you do you'll miss out on lots more great songs from this band.

This album is full of tracks that any self-respecting Scandi Rock fan would die to hear. 'I Want Out', the swaggering 'Number One', 'Don't Wait For Salvation' with its powerful riffs and strong vocals, the keyboardtastic 'Start A Fire', the bouncy and infectiously memorable 'Here I Am', the beautiful ballad 'Look To The Sky' and finally the Survivor-like 'All In' are all so good that you really shouldn't miss out on any of them.

Yes Art Nation sound like H.e.a.t and a lot of other Swedish/Finnish/Norwegian Melodic Rock acts as well – get over it! Their music is wonderful, makes you feel good and if they can keep on writing and playing music of this quality, who gives a monkey's behind whether it's that original or not?

Ian Johnson

AVATARIUM – 'THE GIRL WITH THE RAVEN MASK' *(Nuclear Blast)* HEAVY METAL

DOOM! That heavy, dark and sombre form of music, started by Black Sabbath in the early 1970s and then continued onwards by many a band, has finally led to this new release from Swedish Doomsters Avatarium and frankly it's bloody marvellous. Combining elements like the aforementioned Sabbath with Blue Oyster Cult and even Rainbow, has given this band a unique sound that is jaw-droppingly good.

In addition, having Jennie-Ann Smith on lead vocals is a killer move. Her voice is rich and warm and the emotions she imparts as she sings on this release are breath-taking. She is the focal point for this album's musicality and it's on the strength of her voice that Leif Edling (Candlemass, Abstrakt Algebra), Markus Jidell (ex-Evergrey), Lars Sköld (Jupiter Society) and Carl Westholm (Krux, Jupiter Society) have built their songs upon.

The intense title track 'Girl With The Raven Mask' commences proceedings and the glorious retro guitar work and grinding Hammond Organ drive the track's melodies like a stake into your brain. From there, Avatarium continue to go for your jugular with devastating effect.

'The January Sea' is a song I could see the mighty Candlemass doing, with its heavy guitars, strong arrangements and Smith's superb vocals; this is a real declaration of intent from the band. Then we come to one of the best songs I've heard this year, the charming 'Pearls And Coffins'. Again the way the band have arranged the song is outstanding, with all instruments taking their rightful part in the track but, as before, it's Smith's dramatic vocals that push this song to its logical conclusion.

Other cuts to keep a lookout for are 'Ghostlight' with its dark solemn guitar and bass lines, the up-tempo (for a Doom band anyway) 'Run Killer Run' (which is the fastest song I think this band have ever recorded) and finally the Opeth-like 'The Master Thief' where the ethereal melodies of the song weave and musically rove as Jidell and Smith work their collective tails off to draw all the drama and emotion they can from the song.

This might not be an album to everyone's liking or taste but a good song (or album of songs) is good, no matter what the genre is. Give Avatarium a chance because there's everything here you could want or need in a great Rock release; top musicianship, a huge sounding production, superb songs and a voice to marvel at.

A winner and no mistake.

Ian Johnson

CALIGULA'S HORSE – 'BLOOM' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

Inside Out seem to be becoming synonymous with brandishing the "Quality" trademark for Prog-related releases. Casting the net across the hemispheres to sign the Australian progressive Alternatives sees the quintet's third album being touted as their perfect mission statement. Quite some claim.

Since their 2011 formation around guitarist Sam Vallen and singer Jim Grey, they've not been idle, with their debut 'Moments From Ephemeral City' and 2013's conceptual 'The Tide, The Thief & River's End' both delving into Modern Prog and setting up a solid foundation from which to launch something special.

Central to CH are the guitars of Vallen and Zac Greensill which gives a smooth ringing melodic quality to the sound, verging on lush and alternating between layered textures and something a bit more primeval. Ushered in by the brief title track, which drifts lazily before becoming what is literally a wake-up call, it merges into 'Marigold'; all light and shade and illustrating exactly what singer Grey has referred to as "power and reflection – breathing in and out with a natural ebb and flow". It's probably the strongest feature of the album, the way in which the material doesn't appear too harsh or challenging although there are parts where the guitars get the chance to shred a little with brief forays into something a tad heavier – point in case, check out the technically adept guitar workout in 'Rust'.

Elsewhere you'll find that across the nine minutes of 'Dragonfly' they get to explore an extended piece in what the Prog fraternity might call movements, either side of an atmospheric instrumental passage. It's also where Grey launches into a more dramatic vocal reminiscent of Nu-Proggers Leprous or even Muse. Ending the album with the acoustic and understated 'Undergrowth', CH show that they're confident enough not to do the expected and bookend the album with their best material and fill in from there – we've probably all got classic examples of albums which adopt that method.

When a band claim that their album is everything they've worked towards, they don't want to be falling flat on their faces. Caligula's Horse can puff out their antipodean chests, breathe a sigh of relief that their work is done (for now) and stand tall and proud.

Mike Ainscoe

BILLY VINCENT – 'STAND ON ME' *(Deepdive)* ROCK

Hailing from South London but certainly taking a detour through America is Billy Vincent, a band with a new record out entitled 'Stand On Me'. The band is named, I presume, as an amalgam of co-writers and singers Billy Barratt and David Vincent and they are certainly a convincing outfit.

If you like Bruce Springsteen's early albums, such as 'Greetings From Asbury Park', you will certainly like this; theirs is a soul-wrenching and heartfelt offering of songs sung with conviction. As the press release says "...its Americana dragged through South London" so expect Bluesy songs with a bit of home-grown input.

As for the songs, 'Sleep When You Are Dead' stands out with an echo-ridden guitar riff and a fantastic vocal performance with a Rod Stewart timbre thrown in. There are Pop songs such as opener 'Across My Street' with a jingly guitar riff and commercial chorus, the upbeat 'Loveless Man' and the retro and simplistic 'Hell For Leather'.

The piano-based ballad 'Waifs And Strays' works well and the lyrics, drum beat and vocal performance are very much a nod to The Boss. Contrasting the angst there are some happier songs beautifully exemplified by 'You, Me, The World' and the epic closer 'Sheriff Cook'.

An accomplished record comprising of twelve sincere songs courtesy of Billy Vincent.

Rob McKenzie

BLACK-BONE – 'BLESSING IN DISGUISE' *(SteamhammerSPV)* HARD ROCK

Black-Bone are a three-piece Hard Rock which relies quite heavily on its traditions. The band aspires to evolve Traditional Rock and encourage fresh material from the original aesthetics. The determined three from Eindhoven, The Netherlands are Steef Van Den Bogaard (guitarist and lead vocalist), Sven Hompes (bassist) and Jules Eck (drums).

Their new album 'Blessing In Disguise' is a fragmentation of the Heavy Rock pioneers, Black-Bone have a real taste for Motörhead with Ian Fraser and Velvet Revolver's Saul Hudson (Slash) which really shows throughout the album.

'Nothing But History' is a perfect example; vocals produce a similar twang to that of Scott Weiland, accompanied with the rhythm guitar and tone emulates a similar impression, it's likeable to an extent, it is just missing that crucial hook for an opening track.

'Suicide (Ain't No Way Out)' is the life needed to actually put this album in a "worth listening" pile, it is rhythmically ear catching and the heavy bass line has a real dirty Rock 'n' Roll sound. The vocals are compressed on many of the tracks which gives it a real amateurish feel. 'Enemy' is missing precision and clarity; there is a definite Motörhead-influence but lacking the bold and full sound. This seems to be a repeating pattern.

'Wrong' is a track where there is no turning back in saving this album. It is a song that is missing all its crucial elements, the most obvious one would be emotion. There is a constant drone that just sucks the life right out of it. Another constant theme in this album is a privation of drive. A Metal/Hard Rock song needs a born leader behind the drums, which

lead and create the living heartbeat of a song.

There is hope in fresh material in Rock in this generation but good song-writing is vital, playing well is definitely a part of it but if there are no songs to hook your listeners in with, the musicianship can potentially be missed.

Lara Kisel

BLACK MAJESTY – 'CROSS OF THORNS' *(Pride & Joy)* POWER METAL

A Melbourne-based five-piece; since their debut 'Sands Of Time' appeared a little over a decade ago, Black Majesty have slowly but surely grown into one of the more intriguing Melodic Power Metal bands on the current circuit. I like a kerosene-fuelled riff as much as the next man, but jeez far too many bands rely on that alone these days (and let's face it, few can touch DragonForce in that respect anyway) instead of significantly increasing their potential audience share by mixing things up a bit… a lesson that this lot (thankfully) learnt fairly early on I have to say.

Follow-up to 2012's 'Stargazer' album, 'Cross Of Thorns' is their sixth album in twelve years and whilst the gap between releases has gotten a little longer of late, the quality of their songs has gotten consistently better over the years. Whether it's because they've always managed to maintain a strong melodic edge to their mixture of HammerFall, Helloween, Iron Maiden and Queensryche; whether it's because there's always a clearly discernible Progressive undercurrent to their songs, or whether it's just because they're from Oz (and as such several steps removed from the peer pressure many of the European counterparts are subjected to all the time) is open to debate, but listening to BM is much more enjoyable than a lot of stuff coming out of the U.S. or European domestic scenes right now.

So let's start with the riffs; the backbone of any Power Metal band. Lead guitarist Stevie Janevski and rhythm guitarist Hanny Mohammed have honed their partnership to the point where it's one of the most impressive I've heard in some time – scything riffs and simmering solo's flying at you from all angles yet they can also change it down a gear or two to suit the mood when required. In John Cavaliere they have one of the most melodic Metal front-men you'll find this side of Mike Vescera, whilst the rhythm section (bassist Evan Harris and drummer Ben Wignall) are once again an ever reliable engine room.

But it's ultimately the strength of their songs that still really shines for me; this time more so than ever. Plenty of pomp and majesty in ribald gallops such as 'Phoenix', 'Escape' and 'Misery', but there's also plenty of passion and bombastic melodrama when they change tack slightly as they do on 'Crossroads' or 'Make Believe' – there is a nice cover of Gary Moore's classic 'Out In The Fields' by the way.

All wrapped up in a powerful mix from longstanding friend Roland Grapow, 'Cross Of Thorns' is easily the most accomplished Black Majesty album yet.

Dave Cockett

BON JOVI – 'BURNING BRIDGES' *(Mercury)* ROCK

We might as well switch from journalist jargon to the language of business here – Bon Jovi is one of these bands that straddle the fine line between a Rock act and a well-managed enterprise. But the last two years were no bed of roses for the Jersey syndicate. Richie Sambora's sudden decision to quit his well-paid job in the midst of the 2013 tour was a shock and disappointment for thousands of fans worldwide. Now, post-Sambora BJ returns with a short compilation of songs written during earlier sessions – called 'Burning Bridges' – and not without a reason.

This album also sees Jon Bon Jovi splitting with Mercury Records after thirty-two years of partnership, this double divorce decree could have been a vitriolic, rage-driven record studded with heavier tunes harkening back to 'Keep The Faith' era. It could have been, but it isn't.

Basically, '…Bridges' is whatever one could have reasonably expected from BJ after the last few albums – a few mid-tempo offerings on the verge of Modern Rock and Pop and a couple of mellow ballads. There's also an occasional Country Pop flavour here and there ('Life Is Beautiful' or trenchant title cut with its obvious 'Love For Sale' references).

A few fine moments on the album are to be distinguished, though. 'A Teardrop To The Sea' and 'Who Would You Die For' have the same atmospheric vibe to it as '(It's Hard) Letting You Go' off 'These Days'. Had the arrangement been different, the over-produced and over-polished single track 'We Don't Run' could have become a decent Melodic Rock tune in its own right.

But it's the lead guitar work on this album that surprises the most, even though it's not exactly six string wizardry. However, the producer John Shanks' stand-in job ('…Sea', '…For' or particularly 'Fingerprints' with its elaborate instrumental coda) is overall better than the parts delivered by seemingly irreplaceable Sambora on 'What About Now'. Was necessity a mother of improvement… to give the old adage a twist? One can only wonder.

As multi-platinum 'New Jersey' closed the Hair Metal era for Bon Jovi with its smash hits and 1980's panache, 'Burning Bridges' closes a whole bigger chapter in their history with just a handful of re-worked demos and a bootleg-quality release. A farewell that had to happen, it's a "fan album" mostly for the fans indeed and not a particularly strong record music-wise even in spite of several interesting moments.

More important however is the question what does the future hold in store for the band and what is 2016 (and the more distant future) going to bring – not another 'New Jersey', that's for sure…

Alexandra Mrozowska

C.O.P – 'STATE OF ROCK' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

A substantial part of new Melodic Hard Rock/AOR bands and projects that have emerged in recent years have not been entirely new from the start. Even though the band moniker was unheard of before, the band members' identities and faces immediately rang the bell for the genre's fans, as the bands themselves were comprised of seasoned veterans of the scene rather than debutants. C.O.P is another such entry.

You possibly have never heard about the Swedish powerhouse trio founded just a year ago and now debuting with 'State Of Rock'. The names of Sundell brothers Peter and Christian and guitarist Ola af Trampe, however, are not that unfamiliar for anyone who's been into the Scandi AOR/Melodic Rock scene in recent years. Band names such as Grand Illusion, Decoy and Code are a pretty decent collective resume after all.

The collaborative effort of this trio, entitled 'State Of Rock', is simply laden with carefully sculpted arrangements, guitar-driven intensity and layers of keyboards, amplified by Peter Sundell's dramatized, high-pitched voice rising to falsetto and rich vocal harmonies; it's almost literally, bathed in catchiness. From the ambient intro developing into the opening track 'Loner' to the soaring melody of the final tune 'Darkness', it oozes with the 1980's Melodic Rock tradition in the same vein as White Sister, Aldo Nova, Giuffria, Triumph, Signal, Roxus etc.

And what is more, the indication of particular highlights of the album is not an easy task to complete due to the multitude of strong points. Be it the keyboard wizardry of 'I Want The World To Know', the over-dramatized, mawkish narrative in 'Without You' and 'She's Gone' or intense up-tempo anthems such as 'Broken Heart' and 'On The Run'. On the other hand, maybe it's the topped by thick guitar riffs, galloping solo and fierce drumming that constitutes the band's heavier vibe during 'In My Dreams'…? This is one of those releases where only the listener themselves can ultimately decide.

It would have been a great exaggeration to call 'State Of Rock' a breakthrough album in the genre – AOR/Melodic Hard Rock relied on huge keyboard sounds, soaring melodies, infectiously catchy choruses and polished production since its birth decades ago. But even if there's little to no place for creativity and experimentation within the fixed framework of the genre, it has to admitted C.O.P perfected the art of Pomp Rock in the strict meaning of the word.

While not entirely a novelty, it's simply a job well-done – classic AOR in a contemporary package, an infectiously catchy and melodic album for connoisseurs of the genre.

Alexandra Mrozowska

CHAMPLIN WILLIAMS FRIESTEDT – 'CWF' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

Most bands don't release a live DVD before their debut studio album; but then most bands don't contain two of those 1980's super group's top voices, namely Joseph Williams (Toto) and Bill Champlin (Chicago). Add into the mix Swedish guitarist/producer Peter Friestedt and bingo we have Champlin Williams Friestedt. The trio are not strangers having first worked together on Friestedt's 'L.A.Project' released in 2002 to critical acclaim and its subsequent follow-ups.

The trio toured Scandinavia together in 2012, performing a selection of songs from there illustrious past. One of the shows was released on DVD and topped the Swedish chart and this laid the seeds for what we have today. With the pedigree of the artist's involved, the project has attracted some great artists to contribute including Steve Procaro (Toto), Randy Goodrum (Chicago, Toto) and family members Tamara and Will Champlin.

The first track 'Runaway' leads you straight into the sumptuous vocals, supported with some great guitar work from Friestedt; probably the most Rocking track on the album. The next track 'Aria' is my personal album favourite, beautifully produced and it could have been lifted from any 1980's RomCom film soundtrack, which were always peppered with Classic Rock songs.

The vocal chemistry continues through the album, the harmonies now fully intertwined with some tender keyboards. The songs have been constructed to showcase the vocals, but this does not deter from the high standard of musicianship from the supporting cast. The songs blend into each other perfectly swapping leads until the penultimate song 'Rivers Of Fear'; this is just a vocal masterpiece from two guys who have no right sounding this good

CASABLANCA – 'MISKATONIC GRAFFITI' *(Despotz)* HARD ROCK

Most regard the second album of a band's discography as the most difficult to produce; however, there are those who would disagree and say it's the third. If that is indeed the case, then it must have taken a courageous decision from Sweden's Casablanca to make their third opus a concept album...and a complex one at that. It follows 'Apocalyptic Youth' (2012) and 'Riding A Black Swan' (2013), but thankfully the music remains fundamentally true to their Classic/Hard Rock past and isn't the intricate Prog that the 'Miskatonic Graffiti' storyline would suggest.

Based around H.P. Lovecraft's Chuthulu mythology (I dare you to read up on it!), it follows the fight for survival of The Originals (the first humans?) against The Old Ones (aliens?) in the town named The Mountains, a gateway to parallel dimensions. Rather than compile a PhD thesis I shall simply quote from the promotional blurb, and state the album "… is a record about individuality and collectivity, two equally important quantities, which must exist in harmony if humans are to stand a chance". It all sounds rather convoluted and ostentatious, and in some respects it is; but if the music is of good quality do we need to get weighed down with the whys and wherefores?

Anders Ljung (vocals), Ryan Roxie (guitar), Erik Almstrom (guitar), Erik Stenemo (guitar), Mats Rubarth (bass) and Josephine Forsman (drums) have understandably combined their talents, inspirations and creative juices to produce this smorgasbord of styles, rhythms and tempos, and utmost acclaim should be paid to them.

'Miskatonic Graffiti' is topped and tailed by two epics – 'Enter/Exit The Mountains'. 'Enter ...' commences in true Lovecraft fashion; a Hammer House Of Horrors build-up that evolves into an emotional guitar-driven Rocker. It appears that the Holy Trinity of Classic Rock – Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and Black Sabbath – have been utilised as the sturdy foundations from which to construct the entire soundscape.

However, innumerable other influences are audible throughout; the barnstorming 'Closer', the heavy mid-tempo 'My Shadow Out Of Time' and the excellent 'RE: Old Money' all have a Psychedelic aura about them, especially in the vocal delivery, when Ljung switches from his Jeff Keith (Tesla)/Steve Tyler (Aerosmith) characteristics to those of the great Jim Morrison (The Doors).

It's no surprise that Roxie is one of the mainstays of Casablanca, as his Alice Cooper affiliation is also represented throughout, especially regarding the theatricality of the album (this begs to be played live in its entirety). 'This Is Tomorrow' with its Funky backbeat and the manic 'Name Rank Serial Killer' are also worth a mention.

'Miskatonic Graffitti' is no quick fix, that's for certain. But put the effort in and my goodness, it'll pay dividends. Enthralling!

Dave Crompton

at their age. The final track is a soft landing leading you to hope this is the start of beautiful relationship.

With this release the DeLorean has definitely been set to 1985. With all the retro 1980's feel around at the moment, it's great to hear new, beautifully crafted tunes that take us back to the decade that was a formative part of many reader's musical education.

The album owes a lot to both vocalists main employers, yet is strong enough to stand on its own two feet. The thought that it is a second Toto release of 2015 does not do it justice. This is highly recommended to all fans of AOR/West Coast…time to dig out that Karate Kid VHS tape.

Mick Parry

CHANTEL MCGREGOR – 'LOSE CONTROL' *(Tis Rock)* BLUES/SOUL

There is an abundance of female artists like Joanne Shaw Taylor, Samantha Fish and Christina Skjolberg (to name but three) who are proving that it's not just the guys who can be seriously acknowledged as true Blues guitarists. Now added to that list is Chantel McGregor.

The Yorkshire lass debuted with 'Like No Other' in 2011 and has consistently been recognized throughout the Blues scene ever since with an abundance of awards from "Young Artist Of The Year" to "Best Female Vocalist" and "Guitarist Of The Year" – the first time the award was given to a female artist and not an achievement to be sniffed at. However, for sophomore release 'Lose Control', McGregor has shifted her style considerably – not turning her back on the Blues, but using it as the basis and making the transition towards a more Contemporary Hard Rock style with Progressive influences, all to stunning effect.

Influenced by Southern Gothic culture, 'Lose Control' is a predominantly dark, sombre and somewhat twisted affair, augmented by the Gothic imagery throughout the album's sleeve. The opener 'Take The Power' is dominated by a bruising riff with an element of Grunge, the distorted vocal style enhancing the dark mood – the dense, crushingly heavy, repetitive riff that opens the stunning follow-up 'Your Fever' pushes the mood even further downwards, so when the rhythm kicks in it comes as somewhat of a reprieve. 'Burn Your Anger' and 'Southern Belle' feature more of a commercial Contemporary Hard Rock style, while later on 'Killing Time' more than nods to the likes of Royal Blood and The Black Keys.

The album's ballads also continue in the moody vein, the gentle acoustic and calming vocal of 'Anaesthetize' is counteracted by the dark lyric with the subtle strings adding to the effect. 'Eternal Dream' is similarly structured though delivered with electric guitar, while the quite beautiful 'Home' is a more uplifting acoustic piece. The album's outstanding cut is the closing 'Walk On Land', a gently building slow-burner with Progressive overtones, at seven-and-a-half minutes it's the longest cut, though the final five minutes are completely instrumental, replete with quite stunning guitar solo – Mostly Autumn fans will absolutely love this.

Although a dark and moody album due to the subject matter, it's still very accessible and highly enjoyable. In my interview with McGregor elsewhere this issue, she reveals she started her own independent label so she can be more hands on and control everything. Best brace yourself Chantel McGregor, as on the strength of this release the big boys are sure to come knocking! Potentially a superstar in the making.

Ant Heeks

CATS IN SPACE – 'TOO MANY GODS' *(Harmony Factory)* ROCK

Cats In Space may well sound like a parody of The Muppets famous pigs and yet while they do have a daft name, these Cats have a delicious sound. Settle back, set the controls for "S-E-V-E-N-T-I-E-S", hit go on your time machine and await the thunder-blasts and laser fire of 'Arrival' to whisk you back to one of (if not) the best albums of 2015.

Bold claim but with bold sounds to back that assertion 'Too Many Gods' will be utterly indispensable for anyone with even the merest passing interest in the classic sheen of the 1970's Rock that set the tone and standard for much of the music we still hold dear. This isn't an album that shows an understanding of what made music so good four decades (ouch!) ago, it's an album with a crisp, contemporary production that somehow belongs in that era in a way so few retro albums could even aspire to.

So who are these Cats…? Well between them Greg Hart, Paul Manzi, Steevi Bacon, Dean Howard, Jeff Brown and Andy Stewart, and their guests Mick Wilson, Greg Camburn, Janey Bombshell, Andy Scott and Mike Moran can boast time with everyone from The Sweet, T'Pau, Ian Gillan, Asia, and Robin Trower, to 10CC, Arena, Moritz, Airrace and Statetrooper! However when you factor in a set of songs which genuinely sound like they belong in the catalogue of ELO, Queen, 10CC or Cheap Trick (and so many more… Supertramp, Meat Loaf…) then we're in the presence of something special indeed.

You may have heard "lead-track" 'Mr Heartache' doing the rounds on the net and if you have, doubtless you'll have loved it and been singing it for days after. However that is merely the tip of an iceberg big enough to sink any number of Titanics. The arrangements sound as though they've been lovingly sculpted into shape by the hands of masters, while the easy, relaxed and assured style in which everything is delivered is a joy to behold. There are vocal harmonies that can easily rival John Payne era Asia, and (dare I say it) even Queen in their pomp, and that really isn't a claim you make without giving it serious consideration. However for proof simply sample the Kiss boogie and CT guitar solo of 'Unfinished Symphony', the acoustic 10CC seduction of the saxophone-infused 'Schoolyard Fantasy' or the swooping, soaring strings of 'The Greatest Story Never Told'. And we haven't even mentioned the stomping ELO sing-along of 'Stop' or finger clicking, tubular bell clanging 'Last Man Standing'.

Cats In Space have landed. Prepare to pick your jaw off the floor.

Steven Reid

CHAOS FRAME – 'PATHS TO EXILE' *(Nightmare)* PROGRESSIVE

Said it before and I'll say it again, I "HATE!" with a passion record company bios. Ninety-nine percent of the time they are so wrong that it makes you wonder if the person writing them has even opened the album and played it. Chaos Frame are a prime example; their bio states that what you're about to hear is an album that mixes elements of Heavy Power Metal and Thrash, with frenetic screaming vocals and wailing guitar solos. No you don't.

I'll admit on a couple of songs there are some Thrashy guitar parts but on the whole what CF have recorded is an album that I think has more in common with the Technical Progressive Metal genre than anything else (a good thing in my book). Also in Dave Brown they have a killer singer with a wonderfully melodic voice that is as far removed from a Thrash vocalists as you can get. It's his strong, melodic delivery that gives CF that badly needed edge in this very over crowded genre.

For proof, check out the opening cut 'Painful Lessons' with its multi-layered harmony vocals, strong keyboard melodies and stunningly complex guitar work and wonder why the word Thrash was ever used. 'Paths To Exile' has that sort of musical intensity that is usually found on releases by bands like Zero Hour or Moonsorrow. The guitars of Andy Xiong and Matt Hodsdon bounce off each other, creating byzantine musical patterns and sounds, whilst never forgetting the need for a melodic balance and never straying into "guitar wank" territory.

'Paper Sun' is a fast paced song with some killer vocals from Brown that are complimented by some dramatic guitar solos. 'Giantkiller' has many facets, fast and slow musical passages, mixed with intense guitar, intricate keyboard, bass and drum passages that are again topped off by Brown's passionate and theatrical vocals.

Finally there's the eight minute 'The World Has Two Faces' to contend with, a song where we find a band at the top of their game. This one track sums up CF and what they are all about beautifully and that is playing technically complex Melodic Progressive Metal that has masses of melody and depth running through it.

Chaos Frame are a new band to me and I can honestly say that they have made an album that covers a lot of my Prog Metal bases. So please check them out, especially if you like bands with dazzling yet melodic musicianship at their core.

Ian Johnson

CHARLIE WHEELER TRIO – 'REWIND' *(Graphite)* BLUES/SOUL

A three-piece based in Northern Pennsylvania, the Charlie Wheeler Trio comprises of Wheeler on guitar and vocals, Rad Akers on drums and bassist Dave Fink. They play a brand of heavy Blues Rock which is raw, energetic and authentic.

'Rewind' is their third album, and is packed with powerful tracks such as the bass-led 'Love Letter' and the entertaining Blues of 'Semi Good Lookin". 'Big City Blues' shows Wheeler's muscular voice and tasteful playing off well, while the title track is a slow burner which grows on you with every listen.

'Back To 'Frisco Bay' sees the band start to boogie and is guaranteed to get you moving. The more Funky Blues feel on 'River's Gonna Rise' make it a killer track featuring some marvellous rhythm work from Akers and Fink, while the grinding 'Love Comes Tumblin' Down' is another highpoint. 'The Ghost Of Who You Were' has a strong riff and features one of Wheeler's more powerful vocals.

The band aren't breaking any new ground here, but nor are they trying to. This three-piece prides itself on delivering bona fide, old-school Blues Rock, without layers of instruments and polish. 'Rewind' is almost like a live album in its approach – it's like having a bar band play some raucous Blues in your front room.

It's not new, it's not radical, but if you're into Blues Rock, it's certainly going to tick some boxes.

James Gaden

CHEMIA – 'LET ME' *(Rodeostar/SPV)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Lech Walesa is perhaps what most people think of when Poland is mentioned, not Rock music. Indeed the only Polish band that I can think of from the top of my head is Behemoth; not exactly my cup of tea it has to be said.

Chemia started touring life in 2007 and have supported a whole host of bands including 3 Doors Down, The Red Hot Chili Peppers and Billy Talent. However it's the most recent line-up that should be of interest. In 2012 the band entered the Canadian market where Mark LaFrance became the bands promoter and they went on to record a Randy Staub mixed EP at The Warehouse Studios.

Fast forward to 2015 and Chemia managed to get Mike Fraser (AC/DC, Aerosmith, Metallica) involved to polish up the sound on this, the band's third full-length release. However the real star of the show on 'Let Me' is vocalist Lukasz Drapala; what an extraordinary talent! Combining a Bluesy edge with a voice lying somewhere between Paul Carrick, Glenn Hughes and the now sadly deceased Michael Johns (The Rising), songs like the Nirvana-edged title track, 'The Luck' – The Knack style romp featuring drummer Brent Fitz (Slash, Alice Cooper) – and the Classic Blues Rock of 'I Love You So Much' are elevated to another level.

It's Modern Rock with a Classic Rock touch and the highlights come thick and fast with the straight-up riff-mongering of 'Don't Kill The Winner' a superb mash-up of early Nickelback meets Classic Rock, the frenetic 'Gott Love Me' or the foot-tapping single 'Fun Gun'. The quality of this album is simply stunning, from the production and the songs right through to the vocals.

Modern Rock with a classic twist doesn't get better than this.

Mike Newdeck

CHRIS CAFFERY – 'YOUR HEAVEN IS REAL' *(Metalville)* HEAVY METAL

I confess I don't know much about Chris Caffery despite his "day jobs" in Savatage and Trans-Siberian Orchestra; he falls in to that huge "so much music, so little time to listen to it all" category, so it's nice to come to something fresh with no prior expectation.

Opener 'Your Heaven Is Real' starts of gently and grinds to the finish in soaring runs and frenetic drumming from Brian Tichy (always a pleasure). 'Arm And A Leg' is a kind of Hammer House Of Horror track, it felt like it needed a voice over from Vincent Price although Caffery is suitably sinister, the guitar is filthy and driving although for the me the melody was a little "done". 'Just Fine' has Randy Rhoads-esque chops and could have come from the Blizzard Of Oz studio floor. The pace slows down for 'Why' a meandering slightly Prog ballad. 'Damned If You Do, Dead If You Don't' is a theatrical riff driven song.

CHRIS NORMAN – 'CROSSOVER' *(Solo Sound)* ROCK

Even though everybody will know something by the band with which he made his name, 1970's act Smokie, Chris Norman's decision to quit as lead vocalist to forge ahead with a solo career was one that resulted in a mixed blessing. He had a string of hits in Europe and tours frequently there, but the tradeoff was he pretty much dropped off the radar in the U.K.

Europe's gain has certainly been our loss. I became acquainted with Norman's solo career when I reviewed 2013's 'There And Back' album which was excellent. As a result, I began investigating his considerable back catalogue and found a treasure trove of superb material. Much of it could be housed under the umbrella of Pop Rock, but Norman is a versatile artist and has penned songs in the style of Blues, Country, Soul and many other genres.

For his new album, the vocalist has taken full control by releasing it himself, penning all of the songs alone, and taking responsibility for the lion's share of the instrumental duties, making this one of his more "solo" solo records.

'Waiting' is an emotional ballad, a great example of Norman's singer/song-writer side, while 'Cat's Eyes' is a cheerful, unplugged foot tapper. The exceedingly catchy 'Highest Mountain' is another big highlight for me, and there are several strong love songs here for which Norman has become well associated. 'The Girl I Love' and 'Take This Lonely Heart' are intimate pieces I imagine a lot of his female fans will enjoy, while 'Before The Morning Knows' employs a laid back, Country vibe.

The bulk of the album is quite relaxed and features a lot of acoustic guitar work, although 'Carry On' has a great sing-along style. Right near the end of the record however, Norman breaks out the electric guitars on the quirky 'Alien Like You' and the power chord packed Rocker 'Love's On Fire' which is an absolute stormer. There is also a bonus track, a re-mixed version of '40 Years On' which originally featured on the recent Smokie box-set to commemorate their anniversary.

This is an album which see Norman unrestricted by a record label and free to do what he likes. The result is a record that benefits from repeated plays, as it contains a plethora of styles, but with no dip in quality. I do have to mention the album cover, which I'm sure will be fine in Germany but comes across as just a bit David Brent to me, but that one distraction aside, this is yet another classy record from a supremely talented artist who deserves far more recognition in his home country.

James Gaden

I like the groove and soar of the instrumental 'Hot Wheelz'. We get gloomy and Doomy with the huge 'I Never Knew' whilst 'Sick And Tired' has an effortless 21st Century groove with a 20th Century style vocal. 'Death By Design' is epic, Doomy riffs, screaming vocal and solo licks doing no more and no less than the song requires; once again it would raise up with another vocalist, possibly Bruce Dickinson. That's not to take it away from Caffery's voice, it's definitely fit for purpose, it's just some of the songs could become classics with a legendary voice.

'2.26.15' (presumably he couldn't think of a title) is a sweet little acoustic interlude, a little like finding fairies living among the giants and the dwarves. 'Too Soon To Be Too Late' has a cool groove and a touch of The Moody Blues about the melody. The penultimate 'Over And Over' is another with that has vibe of classy 1970's Rock Opera and Caffery fairly successfully channels his inner Dan McCafferty.

Bowing out with 'Come Home' and Caffery delivers a rather fine album. The guitar work which will bring most people to the album doesn't fail to deliver and the songs are quality. For me it was a nice introduction to an artist I've not really heard before. My only "personal" opinion is that sometimes when you have a talented musician with a half decent voice doing a solo album, there is a temptation to keep it "solo" and do all the vocals yourself. On this album however I just felt that some legendary vocal guests would have elevated this to a potentially classic album.

Helen Bradley Owers

CIRCLE II CIRCLE – 'REIGN OF DARKNESS' *(earMUSIC)* POWER METAL

Savatage were doing Power Metal before the genre label of Power Metal had been coined. Since Zak Stevens left Savatage he's done a pretty good job in his own band Circle II Circle of keeping those elements of well performed, muscular Metal with classical, Operatic flurries of keys alive with enough variety in arrangements to keep the Prog Metal crowd happy too.

'Reign Of Darkness' is now their seventh album and Stevens is the only original member while others come and go and his voice is perfectly suited to this kind of strong, potent but melodious Power Metal. This time round he's got Power Quest's Bill Hudson on guitar, ex-Jaded Heart and White Lion keyboardist Henning Wanner adding their flair while Mitch Stewart and Marcelo Moreira add the booming rhythm section.

Hudson has plenty of opportunity to put his stamp on the record with a myriad of riffs and considerable track time given to allow him to solo. He keeps the solos varied and his playing holds your attention such as on the galloping 'Victim Of The Night' or the chuggathon 'Somewhere' that flirts with different tempo changes to keep it interesting.

The whole band excels on a track like 'It's All Over' where they swing like a wrecking ball. Steven also manages to pen some hooky choruses such as 'Untold Dreams', the punchy 'Ghost Of The Devil' and 'Sinister Love'. The demonical riffed 'One More Day' has a 'Phantom Of The Opera' (the musical not the Iron Maiden tune) feel about it and has a strong, potentially sing-along chorus that should go down well live.

'Deep Within' isn't bad but suffers as it starts to replicate what's gone before. However, the record picks up again towards the end with the arrangement on the slower 'Taken Away' and the piano ballad 'Solitary Rain' that builds to epic proportions (although this is one track that could have gone on longer).

Back in the Savatage days they were forging a new sound, now you know what to expect with a CIIC record but Stevens and company deliver, making this is another welcome addition to the Circle II Circle catalogue which should keep the fan base happy and any casual Power Metal fan looking for a good fix.

Duncan Jamieson

CIRCULINE – 'RETURN' *(Inner Nova)* PROGRESSIVE

According to the press release, Circuline are a new Modern Prog Rock band. They have two vocalists (Billy Spillane and Natalie Brown) who have played in various bands and performed in theatre for the best part of a quarter of a century. Keyboardist Andrew Colyer, lead guitarist Bill Shannon and drummer Darin Brannon were formerly in Prog tribute band Downing Grey. The group is completed by bassist Paul Ranieri formerly of Shadow Eden whilst Matt Dorsey from Sound Of Contact guests and also mixed the album.

Title track 'Return' opens the album and features both vocalists, it is a mid-tempo number with some nice guitar work and some fine keyboards reminiscent of Yes. Second track 'Nebulae' is an instrumental with some nice keyboard touches and solid drumming yet is also has a somewhat Jazz Fusion feel to it. 'Stereotypes' opens up sounding like Threshold and then transforms into a Mostly Autumn type number. There are also snippets of Camel and Rush and features some fine bass and an excellent extended guitar solo. The last fifteen seconds or so pay tribute to Rush's 'YYZ' and are much heavier than what has gone before.

'Soleil Noir' is another instrumental that begins like Rush's 'Red Barchetta' and then morphs into something that would have sat nicely on a mid-seventies Camel album featuring a Pete Bardens style keyboard/synthesiser solo. 'One Wish' is the longest track on the album clocking in at around seven minutes, once again it starts off sounding like MA with some nice vocals from Brown before a haunting piano section that then breaks into a monstrous Threshold heavy section again featuring great keyboards, lead guitar and bass.

'Imperfect' is a short instrumental with some fine lead guitar playing over a mellow piano and is followed by yet another instrumental which features some strange sounding fuzz/stun guitar and some intense drumming from Brannon. Final track 'Silence Revealed' once again starts off slowly and during a lengthy instrumental break sounds similar to It Bites and Porcupine Tree in parts.

So an interesting debut (the band are currently working on a follow-up but without Shannon who has recently left) which shows promise, however it lacks cohesion with too many instrumentals. I wouldn't agree with the blurb about modern…Circuline are definitely stuck in the 1970s and 1980s.

Az Chaudhry

CLARK LANE – 'THE INNER CIRCLE' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

The intriguingly named Clark Lane are based in Umea, Sweden and started out initially as a studio-based project for guitarist Simon Andersson back in 2010. It fast became a full-fledged band which resulted in an EP, 'Smalltown Misery', in 2012.

'The Inner Circle' is the debut full-length release and sees CL corner their own little niche in the Rock music world. The line-up is completed by Kristoffer Pettersson (guitar), Tobias Engdahl (vocals/guitar), Peter Astrom (bass) and Mattias Syring (drums).

The band's style is an interesting Melodic/Modern Rock amalgamation, strangely familiar yet refreshingly different. The melodies and choruses have a distinct Scandinavian feel but the arrangements are structured around a strong Modern Rock framework; crushingly heavy riffs and hard-hitting drums sit comfortably next to "radio friendly" hooks and create a unique identity.

'The Inner Circle', 'Crossroads', 'Voices' and the pacey 'Closer' typify the Clark Lane style whilst the intro to 'My Hell' demonstrates how the band can shift tack to something with greater subtlety. The verse/chorus interaction throughout is attractive and innovative and the guitar solos add a more Metal element without detracting from the overall vibe of the songs.

The material has energy to burn and the track-listing is well balanced. The female vocals that embellish 'Animal' add another dimension to the uniqueness and compliment lead singer Engdahl's more AOR moments during their interplay. The full-on power of 'Departure' drives the song along to ensure that interest levels remain high as the album heads towards a conclusion. 'Hollowman' has a melancholic core and it makes a nice album closer.

The production values are good and the sound is "in your face" and the only thing that lets the whole package down is the rather cheap looking design on the cover.

'The Inner Circle' is a polished and accomplished achievement and that signals what I hope is the beginning of a successful period for a talented and entertaining new name.

Dave Bott

COFFEEPOT DRIVE – 'EDGE OF TOWN' *(Independent)* BLUES/SOUL

Hailing from Croydon, CoffeePot Drive are made up of a collection of musicians who have extensive experience, with individuals among their ranks having toured with names like REO Speedwagon, Status Quo and Uriah Heep. 'Edge Of Town', their debut album, was recorded at Francis Rossi's ARSIS studio and is described by the group as a record full of "jangly, Blues-fuelled Rock".

Fronted by vocalist Lady Oracle, a young lady with a big, mature sounding voice, the band deliver a Retro Rock sound, with a large helping of Delta Blues and a dash of Soul thrown in. 'Fallback' has all of these elements along with a big, catchy chorus, while 'Deep Freeze' is rooted in the Deep South, with its harmonica stabs and acoustic guitars luring you into a moody Rock cut. The eerie 'Bayou' precedes the single 'Hey Suzy!', a swinging and energetic romp which has already made an impression on the iTunes Blues chart.

'Change' ploughs a Reggae-influenced furrow and 'Glass In My Mellow' has a bouncy vibe that draws you in. 'Don't Know Love' is an excellent Blues Rocker which is probably my favourite on the album, which draws to a close with the haunting, piano-led 'Killer'.

It's by no means an "out and out" Rock album, the band themselves prefer to use the term "Dirty Soul", but what is abundantly clear is they are strikingly original. Usually I try and offer some sort of comparison in my reviews to give you an idea of what you are going to get, but the truth is I can't think of any band who sound like CPD.

If you like Blues or Soul with some Rock mixed in, check them out; CoffeePot Drive might be just what you're looking for.

James Gaden

CRIMSON CHRYSALIS – 'ENRAPTURED' *(Musik And Film)* SYMPHONIC METAL

Symphonic Rock has grown over the years to become a major force in the Rock world with the likes of Nightwish and Within Temptation blazing a trail along with Epica and their

ilk not far behind.

It's fair to say that the bulk of the Symphonic bands tend to hail from Europe and Scandinavia (in particular) however, Crimson Chrysalis from South Africa look to break that stranglehold with their second album 'Enraptured'. Built around the powerful, expressive and rich voice of Rene van den Berg, CC offer something just a touch different to the usual Symphonic Rock band.

Album opener 'Soul Stalker' is an absolute monster. A sinister tinkling piano refrain combined with van den Berg's golden voice makes for an impressive start and when the chorus kicks in, it all gets suitably overblown. After a few listens this will be ingrained in your mind for days.

The following tracks take a slight left turn heading in a more Broadway direction and that is no criticism. 'Elegy', with an excellent duet with Andrea Casanova (Rainover) could quite easily feature in a big stage production while 'Sacred Vow' would not sound out of place in 'Evita'.

The Rock element comes more to the fore on 'Raven' and 'Burning Fire With Fire' with its beautiful sirens call opening and Eastern-flavoured riff which will appeal to lovers of more traditional Symphonic Rock. 'Enlightenment', with its haunting melody and dreamy vocal, evokes memories of the Mary Fahl-fronted October Project, just sit back and let that velvet melody drift over you.

'Enraptured' as an album may well not be to everyone's taste. To some listeners the "Musical" element may be off putting but it is worth persevering with as there is some breath-taking orchestration and choral passages that combine to devastating effect with van den Berg's emotive vocals. 'Infinity' is the perfect example of the latter; it's big, dramatic and totally captivating.

Crimson Chrysalis have come up with something just a little bit different to the average Symphonic offering and it may be just enough for them to cross over from a purely Rock audience into the mainstream and in turn draw fans in from the mainstream into the Rock world.

Mick Burgess

DARKNESS LIGHT – 'LIVING WITH THE DANGER' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

Darkness Light is the project of two long-time friends Cristian Bettendorf (guitars, keyboards) and Dietrich "Dixie" Krauser (vocals, bass, keyboards and guitars). They first met back in the nineties when Krauser moved from Hamburg to the city of Augsburg in south-west Bavaria; Krauser's home town is actually Temeschburg in Romania but he emigrated to Germany back in 1985.

The pair first started recording the album back in 2011, however, the release of 'Living With The Danger' was delayed due to Krauser being diagnosed with a severe illness during the initial recording process but, thankfully, he made a full recovery and the album is now ready to be released.

Krauser's vocals are heavily accented but he has one of the clearest dictions that you are ever likely to hear; no need for a lyric sheet here with his almost near-perfect annunciation. The former will surely put off many listeners as will the sometimes questionable lyrics and the over replication of the chorus on many of the ten songs on '…Danger'.

'Adrenaline' (pronounced "Adrenalean") is a competent Rocker as is the title track, although both songs do repeat the chorus too many times for my liking, however the guitar work is very impressive. The pick of the first three Rockers is title track 'Darkness Light'. 'No No More' slows down the pace and here Krauser's heartfelt accent works well.

'Bad Boys Are Better' is every bit as bad as you would imagine from the title and must be in the running for the worst song of the year. Fortunately, the band redeems themselves straight away with the Scorpions style ballad 'Song For You'. 'It Was Just Dreaming' has a pounding bass line and liberally interchanges between Power Pop and Classic Rock (listen out for a similar riff to Led Zeppelin's 'Immigrant Song').

The catchy 'For Another Sunny Day' strays into Euro Pop territory with a Funky keyboard sound. 'Long Ago' heads back towards the Melodic Hard Rock whilst still retaining a Pop feel. The album concludes with the twelve minute 'Alone' that has some impressive guitar work but is just far too long and probably could have been cut down to seven or eight minutes.

Bettendorf and Krauser are undoubtedly great musicians and can write some very good melodies, however, they certainly need some assistance with their lyrics and need to refrain from the over-repeating of the choruses.

Without wanting to sound harsh, I would encourage them to employ a proven vocalist for their sophomore release.

Mark Donnelly

DARKYRA BLACK – 'FOOL' *(Darkyra Black/Cargo)* SYMPHONIC METAL

Now, this is a very interesting musical entity. Darkyra Black is for all intense and purposes a "solo artist" that hails from Australia. What began as a musical project for Gina Bafile has progressed into a fully-fledged band; a Symphonic Rock powerhouse that leans heavily towards Metal and tinges of Opera.

On 'Fool', Bafile surrounds herself with some of the best talents from Europe, making this second effort a stellar body of work! A concept piece, 'Fool' is a musical journey that completely mesmerises from the opening trickling of notes and continues to build. A complicated set of musical movements coupled with a provocative story, 'Fool' will completely surround the listener.

On this offering, the main musical unit comprises of Bafile on vocals, Betovani Dinelli (Joe Lynn Turner) on guitar and Garry King (Jeff Beck, Joe Lynn Turner) on drums and percussion. An additional cast of musicians are also present; Fab Jablonski on keyboards, bassists Tony Dolan and Kostas Vichos along with Ilias Sdoukos on viola, violinist Laertis Kokolanis and Michael Porfyris playing the cello.

The result is an expansive bed of sound that creates soundscapes that follow the emotive story contained. In some passages a full voice choir is also present, producing an intricate sea of sound.

The music flows from height to height, creating an oceanic bed that is fully profound and majestic. Bafile's vocal stylings are powerful, at times muscular, yet always beautiful. We hear outreaches of Opera as well as the deep Symphonic renderings, and all sung crystal clear.

The stories unfolding before us are both full of beauty and, at times, stark. Again, Bafile's voice can aptly handle and uphold the musical atmosphere created. 'Fool' is a complete work, commanding in performance…driving us, the listeners, ever deeper in these flowing rivers of sound.

DAWN OF DESTINY – 'TO HELL' *(Phonotraxx)* POWER METAL

The sixth album from the German Metal band from Bochum who've been grinding out the Metal at a rate of knots since forming in 2005 and the release of 2007's debut '…Begins'. Seemingly picking up where 2014's 'F.E.A.R.' left off, an album which told the tragic story of a wheelchair bound girl, they've gone for it big style with another grand conceptual piece.

Based on a story in which a young honeymooning couple are faced in different ways with the shadowy past of the bride, it sounds more like a plot from a TV drama or the storyboard of a film which might accompany a Meat Loaf song – all surreptitious midnight shadows, atmospheric skyscapes and lace. Strange tattoos, a daughter consumed by fire and mysterious notes all form part of the narrative while musically the album ranges from fiercely intense Rocking to the more epic and Operatic. Fans will naturally delight in taking care to follow the intricacies of the narrative thread through the album although in essence the songs standalone just as effectively.

Aside from the occasional growls from the direction of bassist Jens Faber, Jeanette Scherff's distinctive vocals are accompanied on a couple of pieces by Zak Stevens of Savatage and Bjorn Strid of Soilwork. 21Octayne's Marco Wriedt also adds some guitar as special guest, yet it's the vocal intricacies between characters, the title track being a classic example, which add an impressively narrative effect. It's particularly dramatic with the contrast between the soaring clean voice of Scherff and the growls of Faber on 'Light In The Night', a song carried along on a strong melody and typically vast arrangement.

Musically, the sound shifts from the fringes of what you might term Symphonic Speed Metal on something like 'Fire' to the more epic and Operatic in the musically theatrical 'From Paradise'. In some cases, the switch from the violent pummelling of drums and overblown crescendos to subtle acoustic moments occurs mid-song.

As the story evolves, the music too reflects the mood. 'Scream's grand operatic sound (reflecting a change in the storyline) is accompanied by an intensity in the musical arrangement. 'Hateful Heart' and 'Destroy My World' stand as a couple of big power ballads, the latter introduced with a tasteful Spanish guitar before the strings sweep in and offer some calm amidst the general furore.

'From Hell' places Dawn Of Destiny firmly alongside the glut of Female-Fronted Symphonic/Power Metal bands and the new material promises to be a baptism of fire for new guitarist in the band (Felix Rodermund).

The challenge of the music combined with the challenge of the narrative add up to an ambitious and satisfying combination.

Mike Ainscoe

A very ambitious effort, especially knowing that this is only Darkyra Black's second offering. Recorded in Greece – Athens to be exact – 'Fool' reflects the majesty, myth and magic of the city and of the region. Obviously a heavy European-influence throughout, but one that Bafile is most comfortable in. An album with a first-rate production, produced by Georg Boussounis and mixed by Garry King.

This recorded work captures Bafile fully and sees her at the top of her craft. 'Fool' is a memorable musical story, one that is beautifully performed by all involved.

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

DAVID GILMOUR – 'RATTLE THAT LOCK' *(Columbia)* PROGRESSIVE

The first "new" recording from any part of the Pink Floyd monster since 2006 was always going to create interest. PF themselves ended up releasing an album only once every green ("dark"?) moon, so waiting is a normal state for Floyd/David Gilmour fans. Ultimately, the question with each release is "was it worth the wait"?

The first thing I noted after hearing this for the first time was that, as far as I can remember, this album had a bigger, immediate impact on me than 'On An Island'. Co-written mostly with his partner Polly Samson, the ten tracks cover a wide variety of moods and textures, most of which rest easily on the ears. There are definite strengths and weaknesses.

'The Girl In The Yellow Dress' is a puzzlement to me, as it is, essentially, 1940's Lounge/Bar Jazz, which is so out of place with the other tracks. That aside, things get a bit better. '5 A.M.' reminds me of Floyd openers, with a nice guitar line as a taster of what is to follow. The title track is medium-tempo with a catchy bass line, reminding me a little of 'One Slip', while sounding nothing like it, if that makes sense. However, the chorus is quite disappointing lyrically.

'A Boat Lies Waiting' could have been an opener, slow and relaxed with vocal harmonies over a simple repeated piano line, while 'Beauty' features a guitar sound that reminds me of 'One Of These Days.' 'Today' has a really nice choral start that quickly shifts away and moves to something unexpected that's not too far away from Peter Gabriel. And then 'And Then…' is a really nice, gentle instrumental that wouldn't sound out of place on a Shadows/Hank Marvin album.

Which leaves my two favourites, 'Faces Of Stone' and 'In Any Tongue.' The former is a little odd due to the fact that it reminds me of an old Camel track; there is a strong French sound at the beginning, but the whole song is carried on a very simple fifteen or sixteen note piano line, demonstrating expertly that you don't have to get complicated to sound brilliant. One thing that this track does have though, that I've never heard on a Floyd or Gilmour album before; a mis-hit string in the middle of a lead line. '…Tongue' is the albums 'Comfortably Numb'. The whole song is very melodic, with a very strong chorus that stays with you forever, and there is a tendency to hit the replay button once it has finished.

This is a strong album that proves there is still plenty left in Dave Gilmour's armoury, and anyone who liked anything Floyd will love this.

Andy Brailsford

DAYLIGHT – 'ONE MORE FIGHT' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Originally released in late 2014, this is the Barcelona-based Pop Punk outfits third album.

There's really nothing new to be found here. However the band's brand of New Found Glory meets early All Time Low style Pop Punk is delivered with belief and energy making staples like 'Anthem Of The Broken' or first single 'Consequences' catchy, predictable fodder without being essential.

Where Daylight do fail on occasions is with the vocal delivery; songs like the excellent 'Another Day' and 'Now Or Never' suffer as a result and the Rapping on 'Best Days Of Our Lives' is just plain horrible.

'One More Fight' isn't a bad album by any stretch of the imagination but there's really nothing here to make it stand out from the thousands of other albums in this saturated genre.

Mike Newdeck

DEEP PURPLE – 'FROM THE SETTING SUN (IN WACKEN)…', '…TO THE RISING SUN (IN TOKYO)' *(earMusic)* HARD ROCK

I have now reached the point where I have actually lost count how many Deep Purple live recordings I have heard. When you add up all the live albums I've purchased, along with bootlegs I've heard and records I've been sent to review, it makes you realise that yes, they are a celebrated live act, and by God people have made sure to cash in on that.

This set is sort of a "double" double album, with two disks featuring the band's performance at Wacken, then another two disks capturing the quintet on stage in Tokyo. Both shows see the band promoting their superb 'Now What?!' album (which, don't forget, was also re-issued with a live disk featuring many of these songs).

The Wacken show finds the legends in good form generally, with the rock solid Ian Paice kicking things off with the classic 'Highway Star' drum beat. Steve Morse, Don Airey and Roger Glover are all on the money as usual, which brings us to Ian Gillan. Often a point of criticism, usually unfairly I hasten to add, it's clear due to the fact the man is now seventy that he cannot hit all the notes he used to in his heyday, and nor should he be expected to. His high range has diminished over the years and when he actually sings, he's still a class act. It's only when he tries to scream and emulate what he did decades ago that things can sound a bit thin. Here he struggles with the classics like 'Strange Kind Of Woman' and 'Space Truckin" and sounds much more comfortable with the recent material, of which there is plenty. 'Vincent Price' works really well live, as does the poignant 'Above And Beyond' which is a fitting tribute to the late, great Jon Lord. 'Hell To Pay' is also excellent except for the lack of backing singers, which would have been useful on the gang vocal chorus, but Gillan smartly gets around this by asking the crowd to help him out instead.

'Perfect Strangers' still works very well and the decision to retain the likes of 'Lazy' and 'No One Came', two golden oldies that the vocalist has no issues with, is a smart one, much like 'Hush' which he handles with style. Naturally 'Smoke On The Water' has to be included, here aided by guest Uli Jon Roth, but that works in tandem with 'Black Night' as a great way to end proceedings.

The Tokyo concert sees a couple of set-list tweaks, mostly for the better. This show opens with 'Aprés Vous' which is a brave move and one that pays dividends, as Gillan sounds much more authoritative. The inclusion of the 'In Rock' pair 'Into The Fire' and 'Hard Lovin' Man' Rock hard but really highlight the vocalist's limitations. Fortunately momentum is regained with 'Uncommon Man' which sits between Morse's marvellous showcase pieces 'Contact Lost' and 'The Well-Dressed Guitar'. The decision to bring back 'The Mule' is a good one, as it is another vintage track Gillan can handle without any trouble and allows Paice to cut loose with a stunning solo spot of his own.

Of the two, I'd favour the Tokyo show, but both are good quality documents in general. I'm delighted that such a large percentage of tracks from the most recent studio album are in the set, because not only do they suit Gillan more, they really are brilliant songs. While the band obviously have to retain a certain amount of classic material, Deep Purple dropped 'Child In Time' ages ago because it just wasn't feasible for Gillan to deliver it anymore, and I hope they continue with this approach and don't feel anything other than 'Smoke On The Water' is beyond dropping. Here they prove they're still a spectacular live band and Gillan is still a great singer.

This isn't an essential set, but is well worth checking out, particularly if you share my fondness for 'Now What?!'.

James Gaden

IAN TOOMEY – 'ASCENSION' *(Metal Nation)* HEAVY METAL

If you're a fan of old-school NWOBHM you'll know Bitches Sin and of course their lead guitarist Ian Toomey; 'Ascension' is his debut solo album. A lot of passion and thought has gone into the writing and recording of this album and that does shine through as you're listening to it. Toomey also says that much of the album is deeply personal to him with many of the tracks being autobiographical in nature which adds a lot of intrigue as you listen to it through for the first time.

It's a genre crossing album too as while there is a strong NWOBHM feel across the album with a couple tunes feeling like they just arrived via time machine, there is also a strong Classic Rock vibe too. Some of this is down to the vocals of David A. Mills who brings a little bit of Blues gravel to the mix and his vocals are not stereotypical of what you'd expect from you're average NWOBHM band.

But it's not just the vocals, some of the music has strong swaggering Blues riffs and evokes similarities with seventies Blues-based Hard Rock bands. Also sometimes, when the two styles are mixed, they create an impressive and intriguing sound which should widen the appeal of 'Ascension' outside of Toomey's established NWOBHM fan base.

The way the album is recorded and sounds is quite intriguing too. The production makes it sound at times like a NWOBHM album recorded in the early eighties which actually accentuates the impact of certain tracks and on the more Classic Rock numbers a seventies style recording has been employed. So that retro feel is sure to appeal to older fans that yearn for that style of production which takes them back in time or indeed adds that little bit of magic they associate with musicians like Toomey.

The title track 'Ascension' has an epic feel and an atmospheric touch that really gives the song a real impact. Toomey says this song is about a near death experience and, with that in mind, the song does have a strong ethereal feel to it. The album isn't all deep and meaningful as the wonderfully fun and energetic 'Superman' proves, this one is an out and out NWOBHM track and is really enjoyable. Its killer chorus will get stuck in your head for days; it's a smile-inducing number to Rock out to.

It's a pretty damn fine debut album although when you consider the experience and pedigree of Ian Toomey that should have been obvious from the outset. Fans of NWOBHM and Classic Rock collectively should thoroughly enjoy this album and its mixed flavours!

Paul Woodward

DERANGE – 'THE AWAKENING' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

A young London band who have built a recognisable sound and enthusiastic fan base over the last three years or so, Derange site acts such as Tesseract, Periphery and Karnivool as touching points, and unusually, they're not far off the money.

However with the vocals of Cat Pereira a driving force, they have a USP and while female Rock/Metal vocalists are hardly a rare thing these days (and we're all the better for that fact), to hear a young lady with a voice as impressive as that shown here – and the confidence to use it to the full – is still quite a shock. The full vocal gamut is run across 'The Awakening', a beautiful steady attack utilised to seduce and persuade, while a throaty roar is employed to snarl, bite and generally cause much cowering. It's a fine mix and one producer Russ Russell (Dimmu Borgir, Sikth) highlights with real skill; Pereira's vocal attack is clear and sharp but dirty and brutal when the need arises.

Caustic guitars dart and jab continuously, Derange not afraid to churn up a serious maelstrom to get their message across, yet unlike many of their peers even when they are going all out, melody always remains at their core. 'The Observer' is possibly the best example of how 'The Awakening' surges through its gears, a plaintive intro building into a tumble of guitars and stunning layered vocals, before the riff is stepped up and the drums power into overdrive. Pereira works at her aggressive best here, providing a heady intoxication of emotion and control, the harshness of her delivery never over stepping the mark or careening into parody. However, you could choose from 'The Thinker', 'Passive' or the captivating 'The Negative', where the bass proves invaluable, to discover this band at their best.

Lyrically 'The Awakening' pulls no punches, revolving around themes of "self realisation and improvement in our own state of mind". However that this band deal in such mature subject matter should come as little surprise when you experience the sophisticated sounds Derange can be proud to call their own.

Steven Reid

DEVIL CITY ANGELS – 'DEVIL CITY ANGELS' *(Century Media)* HARD ROCK

To quote AC/DC, "Rock & Roll ain't noise pollution, Rock & Roll is just Rock & Roll." That's exactly what this is, good ol' no frills Rock & Roll, plain and simple, exactly how it should be. And damn good at that!

Of course, that's to be expected when you take into consideration that Devil City Angels are made up of (predominantly) seasoned veterans of the scene. The band came together by accident when L.A. Guns guitarist Tracii Guns, Poison drummer Rikki Rockett and Cinderella bassist Eric Brittingham performed together at a John Entwistle/Keith Moon tribute show and people began chanting "Guns And Rocketts" as a joke. They agreed that the phrase had a nice ring to it and decided to start a band. Needing a singer to complete the ensemble, they enlisted Brandon Gibbs who had been performing with Brittingham (and his Cinderella band-mate Jeff LaBar) in Cheap Thrill. Brittingham would leave following the recording of this album, but in steps journeyman bassist Rudy Sarzo (Whitesnake, Quiet Riot etc.) to fill the void.

Naturally, you're going to find elements of all the members previous output in DCA's music, most notably LAG circa 'Hollywood Vampires' and Poison circa 'Native Tongue', namely straight-forward, commercial-tinged, Melodic Rock & Roll shot through with a Bluesy streak and a confident swagger.

And though the choruses aren't exactly huge, after numerous spins they still become so damn infectious, most notably on the rabble-rousing opener 'Numb', first single 'Boneyard', the stylish 'No Angels', the Country Rock sound of 'Ride With Me' (that wouldn't sound out of place on a Keith Urban record), the almost Sixties-ish Pop of 'All I Need' or the album's solitary ballad 'Goodbye Forever'. 'All My People' is full of Aerosmith-inspired sass, while Guns borrows from one of his former employers for 'I'm Living', as the riff sounds suspiciously like that of Guns N' Roses' 'Mr. Brownstone'.

Yet while the pedigree of the senior members of the band is referred to throughout the album, it's the performance of the band's most unfamiliar (to most) member (Gibbs) that is the glue that binds DCA together. Bearing a likeness to Train's Pat Monahan on the more commercial members, his voice takes on a completely different tone as he pushes it into a higher register on the two tracks that close the album out, namely the rollicking 'Back To The Drive' and the grooving Hard Rocker 'Bad Decisions'.

To quote The Rolling Stones, "It's only Rock & Roll, but I like it." I'm damn sure you will too.

Ant Heeks

DEVILSKIN – 'WE RISE' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

It can't be easy to make inroads into the European music scene when you're based on the other side of the globe. Devilskin have garnered some serious attention in their native New Zealand since forming in 2010, and this, their debut album, was actually released in July 2014, but it's taken until now for it to reach this side of the world – better late than never. It hit the top of the charts back home, so certainly warrants some attention.

'We Rise' is certainly at the heavier side of Fireworks' overall coverage, but that doesn't mean it's not without its merits. Though intensely heavy, crushingly so at times, it's chock-full of melody with a myriad of moods and tempos, taking in Contemporary Metal, and straight-ahead Hard Rock, along with touches of Thrash and even Death and Metalcore (though very occasionally and not enough to ruin the listening pleasure), however the decidedly "fruity"

lyrics throughout could certainly put off some people.

One of the key factors in Devilskin's diversity is the talents of front-lady Jennie Skulander, who has one of the most impressive vocal ranges I've heard since the excellent Lzzy Hale (though I'm not comparing Devilskin to Halestorm here). Impressive enough that she can certainly belt out a Rock anthem with Power and perfect diction, she can also grunt and growl like some of Death Metal's finest, yet on the album's power ballads 'Fade' and the slow-burning, string-laden epic 'Burning Tree' her voice is at times quite beautiful – she can easily go from beautiful to brutal in the blink of an eye.

I would certainly recommend you head over to Devilskin's website www.devilskin.co.nz and check out the videos for 'Start A Revolution', 'Never See The Light' and 'Little Pills', three of the album's most commercial Hard Rockers, to try before you buy.

Ant Heeks

DIATESSARON – 'SUNSHINE' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

With three EP's under their belts in several years of existence, Calgary Prog band Diatessaron have previously been a hard sell on their two poorly attended European jaunts so far, with even a track on the cover disc of Prog Magazine and an appearance at this year's Bloodstock Open Air Festival not raising their profile by as much as their talent deserves.

Hopefully this full album will do the trick for the Canadian quintet, as guitarists Darren Young and Carl Janzen, singer Simon TJ, bassist Erik Smistad and drummer Stephan Bots make melodic emotional music that's simply too good to be ignored. Quirky and original, their own press release describes them as a mix of Coheed & Cambria, Yes, Rush & Weezer, and whilst all of those bands can't be denied as influences, I would add the discordant guitar work of King Crimson and that unique Canadian "je ne sais quoi" to the list of elements that make up their sound.

It's maybe TJ's high and clear voice, the frequent time and tempo changes and unusual instrumentation that points to the first three bands in those influences, particularly the very personal, almost eccentric way he acts out the intelligent lyrics, but the simple Poppiness and lilting melodies of 'All The Way' and the beautiful ballad 'De-Exister' start the album with two accessible curve balls.

The upbeat guitars and more aggressive style of 'Sky Blue' – one of two songs they've recorded before, the other being the impossibly catchy 'The Place Where The Sun Never Sets' – is the most obvious Coheed reference, whilst 'In The End' has a Yes-like vocal melody, prominent bass, swooping guitars and a general structure similar to the ground-breaking U.K. Prog giants.

The weirdly frenetic 'The Hummingbird' and slowly building 'Moonshine' are other glorious highlights, but it's the epic, four-part title track that's the backbone and focal point of the album, containing a multitude of inventive and endearing parts after its multi-part harmony intro.

With its startling resonance and clarity, the punchy widescreen sound of 'Sunshine' is certainly more contemporary than any of the other artists mentioned above. Released digitally through iTunes and the band's own website (with a physical product to follow), it's definitely worth the effort to get hold of if you're a discerning fan of the weird and wonderful.

Phil Ashcroft

IRON MAIDEN – 'THE BOOK OF SOULS' *(Parlophone)* HEAVY METAL

Iron Maiden are back with a brand new double album that clocks in at just over one and a half hours of commanding Metal music. Yet as I first listened to the album, it felt that Maiden were trying to prove something with this release? Not to their ultra-loyal fan base but to themselves. Maybe that's because 'The Book Of Souls' isn't anything like your "typical" Maiden release.

The band have seemingly thrown away the IM song-writing book, in favour of exploring music with a depth and breadth that few other Metal acts ever try or want to explore. The first four tracks on '…Souls' clock in at over thirty minutes, which shows this album isn't for the faint hearted. And the eleven songs that make up this double release really do require time, patience and a real depth of understanding of how Maiden got from their first album to here, before you can even start to get to grips with what the band have achieved on this album. '…Souls', if it is anything, is Maiden with a hunger, attitude and vigour that I haven't heard from them in many, many years.

On the album almost all the band members have had an input into the song-writing, which has given the songs a much broader and wider musical range than ever before. You'll all have heard the first single by now 'Speed Of Light' a superb old-school Maiden romp but it's on songs such as 'The Great Unknown', 'The Red And The Black', 'The Book Of Souls', 'The Man Of Sorrows' and 'Tears Of A Clown' where the depth and breadth I mentioned comes to the fore. Each track is a mini-epic that proves Maiden still have no equals in the world of Heavy Metal.

Though if you want to really find out what IM in 2015 are all about, then you must sit down, turn the volume up and give twenty minutes of your life over to the breath-taking 'Empire Of The Clouds'. Based on true events surrounding the R101 Airship disaster of 1930, this one track has everything IM have been working on for three decades and more in one song.

Their use of strong lyrics, drama and emotion and of course, their flamboyant musical flair are all on show but it's the way you're drawn into the musicality of the piece that is so engrossing. Those almost twenty minutes rush past in a flash and as Bruce Dickinson sings the final line – "and in a country churchyard, laid head to the mast, eight and forty souls, who came to die in France" – you marvel at just how good a band IM actually are.

There's little left to say other than Iron Maiden have once again shown why they are as relevant now as they ever were. Essential and no mistake!

Ian Johnson

DISTURBED – 'IMMORTALIZED' *(Reprise)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Following the 'Taste Of Chaos' tour at the end of 2010, Disturbed decided a break was needed and the band was put on an indefinite hiatus. I caught one of the shows on that tour and it seemed as though everyone was going through the motions. Singer David Draiman moved on to record the Device album (a slightly more Industrialised version of Disturbed), drummer Mike Wengren and guitarist Dan Donegan formed Fight Or Flight (Traditional Rock) and recently bassist John Moyer has been involved in Geoff Tate's Operation Mindcrime project. Five years since the release of the rather lacklustre 'Asylum' it is time for studio album number six and what a return to form it is.

After such a long absence I was not expecting to hear Draiman, Donegan and Wengren (Moyer was not involved in the creation and recording process) sound so rejuvenated. Some credit must also be given to producer Kevin Churko (Five Finger Death Punch, In This Moment and more recently Papa Roach) because he has introduced his own touches to enhance the signature Disturbed sound. In fact the sound on 'Immortalized' has a significant vibrancy and is huge.

The title-track (following a brief instrumental intro) is a chest-beating powerhouse of an opener. The drums and guitars are fully "in your face" before Draiman's unmistakable vocals cut in. Each song is attacked with a passion and enthusiasm that was missing from 'Asylum' and the perfect blend of aggression and melody has great balance and an immediate impact. This is hard-edged Rock music at its finest and though many Fireworks readers will avoid this release because they associate the name Disturbed with music of a more inaccessible nature, they should at least give it a chance.

'The Light' is bordering on Melodic Rock whilst the riffs that form the basis of 'Who' and 'Save Our Last Goodbye' would leave the likes of Primal Fear and Judas Priest nodding their heads in admiration. Donegan's solos are imaginative without being overly self-indulgent and Wengren's drums are the immovable backbone of the sound throughout. The biggest surprise is the cover of 'The Sound Of Silence'; the sweeping orchestral arrangements are almost epic in scope and allow Draiman to overlay an impassioned vocal. The deluxe edition contains sixteen tracks and initially I thought my interest levels would begin to wain towards the end of the seventy minute running time. In fact I just simply hit repeat.

Disturbed are back and 'Immortalized' will be right up there amongst my most played releases of 2015 and there is still FFDP and Shinedown to come. Roll on the tour to follow in 2016.....see you down the front (probably not).

Dave Bott

DON HENLEY – 'CASS COUNTY' *(Virgin)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK

When it comes to Country Rock bands, as far as I'm concerned there are none better than the mighty Eagles. However, Don Henley's solo material has veered into a more introspective and contemporary direction that lyrically sees him casting a world-weary, oft caustic eye over the state of the world and the Good 'Ol U.S. of A. – something that filtered through into the day-job band as they progressed through their career.

So it comes as something of a surprise that Henley's latest solo effort (and his first since 2000's 'Inside Job') is actually a pure Country album – such endeavours are usually the department of his band-mates Glenn Frey and Timothy B. Schmidt (indeed, Schmidt has a writing credit here.)

To fulfil his brief, Henley has enlisted the help of a cast of Country stars old and new, like Dolly Parton, Merle Haggard, Vince Gill, Alison Krauss, Martina McBride, Trisha Yearwood, Miranda Lambert, Ashley Monroe – and Mick Jagger!

In truth, when you strip away some of the Country flourishes, there are a number of songs such as 'The Cost Of Living', 'Waiting Tables', 'Words Can Break Your Heart', the elegant 'Praying For Rain' and especially the sublime 'Take A Picture Of This' that aren't a million miles away from Henley's MOR material like 'Heart Of The Matter' or 'The Last Worthless Evening'. The partnership with long-term collaborator Stan Lynch no doubt enhances this fact, the wonderful, slow-burning duet with the excellent McBride, 'That Old Flame', being one of the finest examples of their alliances to date.

But there is no getting away from the fact that this is indeed a Country album, as the inclusion of the genre's oldies 'Bramble Rose' (featuring Jagger), 'Too Far Gone' and 'When I Stop Dreaming' (with Parton) testify. The one thing that remains consistent throughout, though, is the sheer magnificence of Henley's performance. At the age of sixty-eight, the timbre of his voice is just as perfect as it was when TE' debut appeared back in 1972.

The abundance of Country elements on 'Cass County' won't be to everybody's tastes for sure, but any long-term Don Henley fans will find much enjoyment in this sophisticated album.

Ant Heeks

ELOAH – 'PLANET ZARGO' *(BigBadWolf)* PROGRESSIVE

Progressive Rock is supposed to be a genre for open-minded listeners but if there's a band who can really put your open-mindedness to the test, that's Austrian New Age Prog heroes Eloah. With a name that is basically the Hebrew name for God, this group possesses such an artistic boldness that even Frank Zappa or Captain Beefheart would be impressed.

At times, you can clearly hear some of the influences from these two crazy geniuses, for example in the introductive song 'Planet Zargo', a spaced-out Disco Metal trip which also owes a lot to David Bowie, that will lead you to an unpredictable whirlpool of sounds and sonic galaxies. Synthesizers and sequencer additions do the rest but if they weren't enough, there would always be the Bossa Nova of 'Batida De Coracao' and 'Primavera' to keep your listening promptly stimulated.

The sonic trip goes through a dark descent in 'Wind Through A Key Hole (Sands Of Time)', which finely links Type O'Negative to Moonspell and then it even accommodates a freestyle Rap near the end. 'Dimanche Oublie', instead, sounds like a tragic spoken narration ala Tom Waits but fortunately 'Grace' uplifts the spirit with allusions to early Jefferson Airplane, thanks to angelic female vocals by Lila Herderberg. So does 'Soundless Breath', which has got that airy and metaphysical Byrds-like West Coast feel as well, due to the New Age environment which also the 1960's band shared.

You can even enjoy the Party Rock/Acid Jazz of 'Sons Of Light' and then, four minutes later, the learned delirium of 'Mobius'. At the end of the album there's also space for a Neue Deutsche Härte digression ('The Glint'), a Metal subgenre, made worldwide famous by German band Rammstein, which, being them from Austria, is quite geographically familiar and culturally comfortable for Eloah.

In conclusion, there's nothing to complain with an album like this because there's no

JAC DALTON – 'POWDERKEG' *(Independent)* MELODIC ROCK

For some reason or another – be it high expectations or simply fatigue – the so-called "third album syndrome" is not generally avoided by many artists. However, some are also able to defy this recurring phenomenon; each of their three consecutive albums being a step forward rather than corner cutting.

U.S.-born Aussie singer/song-writer Jac Dalton returns so as to prove his adhesion to the latter rather than the former group with his new album 'Powderkeg'. If there was anything left to prove after the stylistic volte-face of his second album 'Icarus', the follow-up to it should put the doubt to rest.

Change within sound aesthetics between the two preceding albums of Dalton was perhaps not drastic but noticeable. In the case of 'Powderkeg', it picks up more or less where the sophomore effort left off. But this time around all knobs are simply turned up to eleven!

The opening eponymous track is a clear testimony to this with its massive, keyboard-laden Melodic Hard Rock sound which blends contemporary, polished production with a distinct 1980's vibe. The rest of the material doesn't fall behind as well – whether it's a catchy up-tempo driven number with powerhouse chant and dynamic instrumental background ('Roll With The Punches', 'HardCore Superstar', 'Can't UnRock Me') or a moving ballad with a message ('One Heart / One Land').

His tradition of paying homage to the Classic Rock pantheon is continued on 'Powderkeg' too, this time a gem of choice being Aerosmith's 'Sweet Emotion'. A bold but brilliant take on it sees Dalton gravitating towards straightforward Rock aesthetics rather than slightly Bluesy flavour of the original version. AOR-ish tune 'Just Enough To Believe' is another reference in terms of lyrics – expressed less explicitly perhaps, but if you grew up in the 1980s or are familiar with Rick Springfield's catalogue (or both), you should get the trick right away.

As explosive as its title rightfully suggests, 'Powderkeg' is another step forward on Melodic Rock path for Dalton and his Aussie ensemble. A logical continuation to its predecessor music-wise, yet even stronger than the aforesaid sophomore album, it combines the classic and the modern into a pulsating, lively musical entity.

It is certainly the best release from Jac Dalton so far as well as being one of the best representatives of its genre released in 2015.

Alexandra Mrozowska

lame, boring or shallow moment here. Everything is so stimulating, your mind can only benefit from such a variety of music that is so brilliantly interpreted. You just have to make the effort to let your auditory receptivity loose.

Enrico Navella

EMERSON LAKE & PALMER – 'LIVE AT MONTREUX 1997' *(Eagle)* PROGRESSIVE

This is the first ever release of the audio from the 1997 'Live At Montreux' show, this double disc offering also includes sleeve notes from both Keith Emerson and Greg Lake on their relationship with the city of Montreux and what it meant to Emerson Lake And Palmer.

Opening with one of the most well-known ELP songs 'Karn Evil 9-1st Impression Part 2', the sound is crisp, although Lakes vocals sound a little dry and could have done with a little reverb I think. Carl Palmer's power house drumming drives so much of the music, his percussion dynamics remind us why he is still regarded as one of the best stickmen in the business.

Some songs like 'Tiger In A Spotlight' sound a little too standard Rock 'n' Roll by ELP standards and to these ears seem out of place among the more intricate musical compositions.

'Touch And Go' from the underappreciated Emerson Lake & Powell album, is a Melodic Rock masterpiece and a welcome addition to the set-list, it really stands head and shoulders above some of the bands more self-indulgent songs like 'Honky Tonk Train Blues'.

I always enjoyed the more subtle melodies contained in songs such as 'From The Beginning' and 'Lucky Man', Lake's silky vocals and acoustic guitar work really shine here.

Bleeding one song into another, 'Tarkus/Pictures At An Exhibition' takes on a whole new shape in the live environment. Lake did deputise for John Wetton in Asia and you can hear the similarities in his voice on these songs. Special mention should go to Emerson who really plays some terrific Jazz Rock keyboards, and it is refreshing to hear a more laid back approach to his playing.

The final track is a monster melody of 'Fanfare For A Common Man/Carmina Burana/ Drum Solo/Rondo/Toccata And Fugue In D Minor'. All three musicians get a chance to deliver their own stand alone moments to great effect.

This is the sound of the band celebrating their return from the Prog wilderness.

Ray Paul

EOFE – 'EOFE' *(Cream)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

I've been aware of young Dudley Rockers EofE for some time now and they have been a band in steady evolution as they experiment with sounds and styles. Starting out as a Pop Rock band with loud guitar's, their highly melodic vibe even saw them tour stadiums with McFly. Something I feel the band now like to keep quiet, but it was a big break for them and gives them a wealth of experience not to be baulked at. One of the main reasons they tend to gloss over that touring experience is that their sound has evolved into more mainstream "Kerrang friendly" territory akin to Mallory Knox. So obviously when trying to sell yourself to those circles, mentioning McFly will send the wrong impression although to be fair an opinion on a band's music should always be based on a listen as opposed to opinions on other bands!

I have to admit when this their self-titled debut landed in my hands I was a initially reluctant to give it a spin, although I was interested in what they were doing in the past, the turn towards a more mainstream style had lost me as I wasn't a fan of their lead single 'Get Caught' which saw the band showcase their new musical direction.

They are less smooth and a lot darker than they were and have definitely forged a more current sound. Thankfully though their highly melodic nature shines through and despite my initial worries, I found myself enjoying the album immensely albeit the more obvious smooth melodic numbers but it will be the more discordant tracks like '…Caught' that propel them into the limelight.

These guys know how to write a hook and this ear for the commercial will make them stand out and of course give them a wider audience than your average Metal band. I'm glad the bands ambition hasn't made them forget what makes a good song good and it's pleasing to see their highly melodic song-writing style still shines through.

I do feel the album doesn't showcase vocalist Tom Harris' true abilities though as this style doesn't need smooth vocals and whilst it does see Harris show his vocal versatility it only occasionally, on the more melodic numbers like 'Bridges', gets time to shine; I think is a shame, but it's all down to the style not the talent!

With the right exposure these guys should explode into the mainstream and be rubbing shoulders with the likes of Young Guns, MK and You Me At Six on bigger stages. If you are a fan of those bands then the debut from the Black Country's EofE is going to mightily impress you!

Paul Woodward

EXOVEX - 'RADIO SILENCE' *(Aboufanti)* PROGRESSIVE

This album seems to have come in under the radar, released in March it only arrived for review in August, which is something of a surprise when considering the marketing value of guest appearances of players with a pedigree that includes Porcupine Tree (Gavin Harrison, Richard Barbieri), Steely Dan, Toto, and Sting (Keith Carlock) amongst others.

This concept album, which is the brainchild of writer, multi-instrumentalist and producer, Dale Simmons, has as its central theme the downward spiral and ultimate demise of a man due to the psychological and physical effects of a long term, self-imposed isolation; with the songs representing a sequence of events that document his thought processes and eventual deterioration. That sounds gloomy but that's not representative of the music's overall feel.

In modern parlance this is a very short album at not much over forty minutes, but that shouldn't detract from what is an album that will appeal no end to those with a penchant for the Modern Prog style as epitomized by Steven Wilson and his disciples. One might feel that the style is a little too close to that of the aforementioned PT and in places Pink Floyd, both of whom seem to be influences.

Opening song 'Stolen Wings' has a definite PT vibe, particularly in the vocal delivery and drum pattern, albeit with a bit more tempo than I associate with them. The track kicks up several gears when Simmons tears off a really good guitar solo. 'Metamorph' has an easy-going start and features more fine guitar work, both electric and acoustic. As he does on the first track Carlock excels on the drums. Mid-way through it gets heavier and somewhat abstract, which loses me in terms of melody.

'Seeker's Prayer' moves into PF territory initially with the guitar work sounding exactly like Dave Gilmour, when the main part of the song arrives its back to the Wilson/PT-ish style. The shouty vocals on the chorus aren't to my taste. 'The Last Orbit' opens with really nice acoustic guitar refrains, the processed vocals work well and, in a familiar pattern, the track toughens up from time to time. It has the feel of what I'd imagine a modern PF would sound like until the guitar break which is absolutely redolent of classic Gilmour.

'Dead Reckoning' gets the blood pumping as it hurtles along before closing number 'Daylight (Silent Key)' calms things down with a decent Blues intro. A brooding start gives way to an extended guitar solo that remains relevant throughout and doesn't descend into unnecessary widdle. It ends with a melancholy piano and string arrangement that seems rather fitting.

Gary Marshall

FEDERAL CHARM – 'ACROSS THE DIVIDE' *(Wire-Sound/Cargo)* HARD ROCK

Alright! Get ready to Rock - with absolutely a capital "R"! From the opening blast, one can tell that this foursome are veteran live musicians, despite their actual age! 'Master Plan' – cut one on 'Across The Divide' (the group's second effort) – will become a stage staple. The interplay between Nick Bowden, Danny Rigg, LD Morawski, and Paul Bowe sets up an instant groove. A groove that just Rocks out to the heart!

Twin guitars, thanks to Bowden and Bowe propel each number and sit securely in the "pocket" created by the driving rhythms of bassist Morawski and drummer Rigg! Yes, grooved-out Rock; listening to '…Divide' reminds me of a super-tight jamming band that sets to the stage and takes control.

Even their slower paced Bluesy songs have them perfectly mixing their instruments together. This coupled with the heart-filled soaring renderings of Bowden's vocals allows you to have a complete Rock experience with each song! Guest keyboardist Justin Shearn just adds the shine to this Rock-filled set!

The whole of the album sounds like it was recorded straight off the floor! Produced by both the band, and Jon Green, I wouldn't be surprised if the process included a lot of analogue methods, there's such a warm sound to the overall disc.

'Across The Divide' is huge – in sound and in talent. Talent that you will definitely want to hear live. Steeped in American Blues with the sensibilities of British Rock, these four English Blues Rockers lay down big slices of Rock the way it should be laid out! Listening, we hear each instrument – every nuance and every breathless singing note! As is on this record, it surely will be on stage, sounds that will be rollicking and rolling into each other.

On record and on stage, 'Federal Charm' paint a canopy of musical emotion. Nothing short of ear-candy; Rock-candy that is!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

FIVE FINGER DEATH PUNCH – 'GOT YOUR SIX' *(ElevenSeven)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Now write these ingredients down. A full quart of Heavy Metal, the Judas Priest and Primal Fear kind, and then add two equal shots of Modern/Alternative and Melodic Rock. Blend together and you have the perfect recipe for a very tasty Punch….the Five Finger Death kind. This Punch hits hard and should not be diluted, but ice will be needed because temperatures will soar.

Adopting for the most part an 'if it ain't broke don't fix it' policy, the L.A.-based five-piece continue with their own no-nonsense musical style, a style that has served them well during the course of six studio albums. This time around the hooks are even bigger and I'm tempted to say that 'Got Your Six' is the band's most commercial release to date.

The title-track gets things off to a rampaging start. The riffs are fierce and Ivan Moody's

vocals are in equal measure caustic and clean. There are a number of time changes during the course of just three minutes and though this does not in any way relate to a Progressive mantra, it does highlight great creativity. 'Jekyll And Hyde' reveals its dual personality in the form of a Rap-like verse and a chorus just crying out for a big arena sing-along. All the other songs are primarily adrenaline-fuelled and anthemic but the arrangements feature enough variation to avoid repetition and monotony during the fifty-five minutes running time.

'Question Everything' (love the mid-song Flamenco guitar) and 'Digging My Own Grave' contain a number of ideas in each song and exemplify what FFDP are all about. Equally brutal and emotional and showcasing Moody's vocal prowess (yes, the guy can sing), they change tempo regularly without straying too far from the main song structure. Jason Hook's guitar solos on '…Six' are imaginative and direct and he is backed up admirably by Zoltan Bathory. The Jeremy Spencer (drums)/Chris Kael (bass) rhythm section lays down the bedrock and is the foundation for the overall power of the material.

The sound, courtesy of Kevin Churko (take another bow), is simply huge, allowing every song to impact and resonate. The only real respite comes during track fourteen, 'I Apologize', giving the listener something of a breather before hitting repeat becomes a necessity. If you have never listened to a Five Finger Death Punch album then do not be dismissive just because of the name. Yes the music is aggressive and at times profanity rules but every song is blessed with a hook that some AOR/Melodic Rock bands can only dream of.

There is only one thing left to say. 'Whose round is it? Same again for me please... without the ice'.

Dave Bott

FOREST FIELD – 'ANGELS?' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

This is like seeing a Lowry and finding that he did cartoons as well. Or finding out that Gareth Bale plays tiddlywinks in the middle of a game.

Forest Field are Prog alright; they suddenly decide that they want to go somewhere else and never mind overbalancing the song. Sometimes there's a quart in a pint pot, there are church choirs, rough riffs with daunting Melodic Rock choruses, guitars taking melodies; sometimes all in the same song.

There is far too much piano-based atmos in 'It Looks Like Rain' and 'Message For A Messenger', but when the mash-up works, as in the clean lines of 'Angels', it is enervating. 'Lovers Lane' has a fancy beat, but is rather ruined by the guitar taking the melody, and when we go to Paraddidle City in 'Change Me', finally settling on Hair Metal Boulevard, that is all we need. But then 'In Excelsis' gives us the words "very Coldplay" and things take a turn for the worst...

At least 'The Zoo' is attractive, the best here, tight Prog Metal and some helpful Classic Rock goodness, whizzing synths and a surprising AOR chorus. It's all there in this tune, just in the right order. They just don't tailor it well enough, often enough and so the songs bulge in odd ways, with unsightly annexes and no planning permission.

A real example of the tyranny of choice, Forest Field have too much to play with and not enough places to stuff it.

Steve Swift

GENTLE KNIFE – 'GENTLE KNIFE' *(Bajkal)* PROGRESSIVE

It takes a special kind of listener to truly embrace Progressive Rock (in all its innumerable guises). One needs an open mind, adaptability, passion and perseverance; and it's becoming clear that maybe I'm lacking in one or two of those departments compared with seasoned Prog aficionados. That's not to say I struggled with this self-titled debut album from Norway's Gentle Knife nor does it mean I haven't given it a fair chance; it just took a little longer to appreciate.

The band (or should I say "orchestra"?) consists of ten (!) members the nucleus of which are Melina Oz (vocals), Hakan Kavli (vocals, acoustic guitar), Ove Christian Owe (guitars), Eivind Lorentzen (guitars, synths), Odd Gronvold (bass) and Ole Martin Svendsen (drums, percussion). But it's the peripheral players who tend to set this band apart from its contemporaries; Pal Bjorseth (keys, vocals, trumpet), Thomas Hylland Eriksen (sax, woodwind), Astraea Antal (flute, winds, visuals) and finally Brian M. Talgo (samples, words, visions) are cleverly integrated within this pastoral soundscape.

I could offer a hundred comparable bands to GK, but if you think Transatlantic, Mostly Autumn and Flower Kings of the modern era, and King Crimson, early Genesis and Pink Floyd from those halcyon days of the late 1960s and early 1970s, then you're in the right ball park.

Conceptual in nature, and containing eight songs/suites, the album depicts a rather enchanting story about an adventurer's innocent sojourn into a "seemingly" innocuous forest (I promise, I won't spoil the ending for you!). The songs themselves are all slow/mid-tempo, conventional Prog fayre but the subservient woodwind and brass embellishments are never far away to add texture, depth and much welcomed variation.

The opening twosome, 'Eventide' and 'Our Quiet Footsteps' are both over ten minutes in length; the former replicating the Neil Morse/Spock's Beard/Transatlantic sound, whilst the latter gradually unleashes everything they have at their disposal. Throughout the opus the duel vocals of Oz and Kavli dovetail rather well, however, it's Oz with her Christina Booth (Magenta)/Kate Bush traits that steals the show.

'Remnants Of Pride', 'The Gentle Knife' and the very PF ('Us & Them') 'Beneath The Waning Moon' are more standard Prog, which seductively manipulate their way into the psyche. 'Beneath …' is an instrumental, but a major highlight nonetheless. As the narrative unfolds, so does the music, and at times the spasmodic infusion of Jazz creates a sense of foreboding – 'Tear Away The Cords That Bind' does exactly that, as Oz replicates Bush at her most flamboyant!!

Does Gentle Knife cut it? Overall I'd have to say yes – however, the tempo throughout is rather pedestrian. Progheads fill your boots, the remainder… prepare to be tested!! An interesting debut.

Dave Crompton

GENTLEMANS PISTOLS – 'HUSTLER'S ROW' *(Nuclear Blast)* HARD ROCK

It's been four years since 'At Her Majesty's Pleasure' was making an impact for Gentlemans Pistols and receiving a serious amount of critical acclaim. Four years is a long time in most walks of life but in music, for other than the biggest names around, it can quite literally be a life time. So signed by a big name label in Nuclear Blast, 'Hustler's Row' has maybe got a bit of catching up to do for the band.

And I'm pleased to say it does so with ease. The band's style hasn't changed, there's no great surprises here; guitar-heavy Rock with a feel of classic 1970's Led Zeppelin and The Who type riffs, a touch of straight forward Boogie, all coming from the excellent guitar pairing of main-man James Atkinson and lead work of Bill Steer.

Right from the off 'The Searcher' hits you with big fat wall of sound followed up with 'Devil's Advocate On Call'. And it's the impressive guitar work that makes this album what it is. This is good old fashioned, guitar-dominated Rock; no frills, nothing fancy, just Rock guitar as it's always meant to be. Whether its rhythm and lead complimenting each other or both players working in tandem, the pair hit it off with ease.

'Time Wasters' sees Steer's lead licks throughout the song highlighting a solid riff with a feel of early – very early – Kiss, whereas 'Private Rendezvous' has the sort of twin harmony mid-section that became synonymous with Thin Lizzy. But much as the two guys work so well together, the revelation for me really is Steer's lead work.

If I liken his playing to Michael Schenker and John Norum, there's no higher praise in my book. Fast and pacey where needed, he can let rip without having to resort to over-speed shredding, whilst still incorporating bags of feel and emotion at the same time, typified by 'Stress And Confusion'; an atmospheric slow Blues number, building towards a stunning solo to end.

The tight team of Stuart Dobbins on drums and relative newcomer Robert Threapleton on bass hold things together allowing Atkinson and Steer to work their magic together. My only minor criticism would be that whilst this is unashamedly a guitar-based album, the vocals do seem a little muffled in the mix and could maybe benefit from being a more prominent in the overall sound.

It may have been a four year absence – and with apologies in advance for the puns – Gentlemans Pistols are back with a bang with an album that could quite easily blow you away.

Ian Parry

JOEL HOEKSTRA'S 13 – 'DYING TO LIVE' (Frontiers) HARD ROCK

Many of you will know the name of Joel Hoekstra from his tenure with the mighty Night Ranger. Since he left that band he's been recruited to work with David Coverdale in Whitesnake and in between this, he's also found the time to record a solo album entitled 'Dying To Live'.

On the album he's surrounded himself with some of the best musicians in the business to help make his music come to life. These include Tony Franklin on bass, Vinny Appice on drums, Derek Sherinian on keyboards and Toby Hitchcock and Chloe Lowey on backing vocals. Now if those wonderful musicians weren't enough to whet your appetite, Hoekstra tops things off by having two old friends providing vocals for his songs. So take a bow Jeff Scott Soto and Russell "God!" Allen, who really do put in some great performances on '…Live'.

Now I know some will be crying out, that this is just another in a long line of Frontiers projects but it doesn't sound or feel like that. The album has much more of a band feel and that's down (I feel) to the song-writing of Hoekstra. He has written a very complete set of songs that doesn't try to chop and change styles to suit the moment or mood. Instead we are provided with what we all want, a Melodic Hard Rock album full of fine performances and strong tracks.

Kicking off with the fantastic opening salvo of 'Say Goodbye To The Sun' and 'Anymore', Hoekstra and associates let you know what they're all about, which is playing catchy intoxicating Hard Rock filled with that superb Hoekstra guitar work. For me though, it's from the third song onwards that the band really hit their stride. 'Until I left You', 'Long For The Days', 'Scream', 'Never Say Never', 'Changes', 'Start Again', 'What We Believe' and the caustic title track are all prime examples of how to write, produce and perform classy sounding Hard Rock. And I defy anyone who calls themselves a fan of this genre, to not like what they are hearing.

On a purely selfish note I wonder if Joel Hoekstra would not be better served by forming a touring band to play this music, rather than joining Whitesnake (sorry Snake fans), as I'd love to see this album's songs performed in a live setting. That probably and unfortunately isn't going to happen, so we (including me) will just have to satisfy our musical wants with this superb release.

Ian Johnson

GLORYHAMMER – 'SPACE 1992: RISE OF THE CHAOS WIZARDS' *(Napalm)* POWER METAL

They're back, Dundee's finest Gloryhammer return to take up their fight as Scotland's finest Metal Warriors. They began their struggle against the evil sorcerer Zargothrax on their first release, where he was defeated by the hero Angus McFife at the battle of Dunfermline and then frozen and imprisoned in liquid ice for a thousand years.

The new album takes up the tale many years later, when a group of evil wizards gather to release their Master from his dungeon of ice and then try to help him conquer the universe. With the Galactic Empire and the Kingdom Of Fife now in mortal danger, let battle commence.

Pure over the top Sci-Fi/Fantasy daftness I know but it's so good to hear this splendid Metal band once again that you'll soon find yourself so caught up in the music; you will be looking for your Claymore and shield, rooting for the good guys and hoping that once again they can save the day.

After the mandatory intro, the band soon hit their stride with 'Rise Of The Chaos Wizards', 'Legend Of The Astral Hammer', 'Goblin King Of The Darkstorm Galaxy', 'The Hollywood Hootsman' and 'Questlords Of Inverness (Ride To The Galactic Forest!)'. All the songs have galloping melodic riffs, chant-along choruses, choirs of backing vocalists and a Metal sound that has you reaching for the tennis racket, so some serious air guitar can be played.

Then Gloryhammer, who up until this point have been playing music that wants to pound you into insensibility, hit you with a disco song? I know sounds strange but 'Universe On Fire' has a Metal dance beat with programmed drums and keyboard sounds from the 1970s. It's the least heavy track on the album (funnily enough), however it's also a bloody great song and fits in perfectly with all the others.

Then finally comes the two tracks that, for me, sum up Gloryhammer in a nutshell; the

grandiose 'Heroes (Of Dundee)' and the berserk 'Apocalypse 1992'. These two songs have had everything a Metal band needs to make a great song (including the kitchen sink) thrown into their mix. Hammering drums, wailing guitars, melodic keyboards and powerful vocals are all in evidence throughout these two Metal monsters. They are so good that they deserve the ancient mighty Scottish battle cry of "Crivens!" (copyright Sir Terry Pratchett!).

Bonkers, daft and nuts – yes indeed – but still absolutely brilliant; Gloryhammer have a winner on their hands. For True Metal fans this is a must.

Ian Johnson

GRAAL – 'CHAPTER IV' *(Jolly Roger)* PROGRESSIVE

The Italian band Graal has released what I presume is their fourth album 'Chapter IV' and by all accounts it's a more mature and accomplished platter than before. With a mixture of Jethro Tull Folky/Prog Rock sounds and more down to earth Rock, this album has a lot to offer.

The singer's vibrato-filled voice fits well with the strong guitar sound and ever-present keyboards and organ and the overall impact is dynamic. The quiet starter 'Little Song' (which it is) leads to the impressive 'Pick Up All The Faults' which leaves no stone uncovered with full guitar and keyboard solos, second melodic solos, even a solo bass passage! Things don't let up with the tracks that follow; 'Shadowplay' and the Marillion-eque 'Revenge' where the vocals even have that edgy Fish-vibe.

To ensure all tastes are satisfied, a Prog instrumental is thrown in; entitled 'The Day That Never Ended' and starting with a mesmerising keyboard riff, this is a frantically played affair. The middle of the album actually turns more Prog Metal with the menacing 'Guardian Devil' and endearing 'Last Hold'.

The last vocally led track is 'Goodbye' and it is an epic affair with a classic quiet intro leading into inevitable crashing guitars and swirling keyboards. The album ends with instrumentals 'A Poetry For A Silent Man' and 'Northern Cliff' providing a gentle close to proceedings.

Nothing to dislike and plenty to like.

Rob McKenzie

GRAVE DIGGER – 'EXHUMATION: THE EARLY YEARS' *(Napalm)* HEAVY METAL

Ahead of their next studio album, Grave Digger has made a great decision in re-doing the best of their songs from the 1980s. This is for two reasons; the first being those 1980's albums are a bit harder to find now and secondly (and most importantly) it gives an opportunity for Axel Ritt to be let loose on those songs.

Joining the band in 2009, Ritt has provided some fantastic axework on the subsequent albums such as 'The Clans Will Rise Again' and 'Return Of The Reaper'. Nicknamed "Iron Finger", Ritt certainly has the speed but also the tone and melody to add musicality to the GD signature sound of raw power.

The tracks come from the 1984 to 1987 albums – those being 'Heavy Metal Breakdown', 'Witch Hunter', 'War Games' and 'Stronger Than Ever'. That final album broke the mould from GD's standard, more aggressive sound and seemingly it did not work so well as the band did not record again until 1993.

GD is a class band, the vocals are sung with uncompromising passion by founding member Chris Boltendahl and with the guitar prowess of Ritt, bassist Jens Becker and drummer Stefan Arnold they do this genre of music well. Don't forget the Grave Digger himself (that is keyboardist Hans Peter "H.P." Katzenburg).

As for the highlight of the album for me, the hypnotic riffery of 'Witch Hunter' plus its crazed chorus is hard to beat.

Rob McKenzie

GREYBEARDS – 'LONGING TO FLY' *(Attitude)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

With not a grey beard in sight, 'Longing To Fly' is the debut from a trio of young Swedish musicians that slides into the Alternative Rock category like a non-studded glove. All three members have music degrees, which doesn't make it very surprising that their debut definitely has a sound that you can imagine students getting quietly crazy over.

There's plenty of upbeat songs here, which is always a good thing, with hints of the ever present Foo Fighters, Queens Of The Stone Age and fellow Swedes The Hellacopters, which results in a happy feel and an album that doesn't grow dull over time.

Saying that, it also doesn't jump out and beg to be played, as the ten tracks leave a distinct feeling of "yeah… that was pretty good" in your mouth, rather that of "holy shit… what was THAT!" if you see what I mean.

The vocals are pretty good, and stand up top other bands of the same ilk, and when they get going Greybeards have a good time Rocking out, but all the same nothing really stands out and nothing makes you raise your fist and yell.

So what we have is a decent debut that certainly has appeal for fans of well-paced Indie type Rock. It's well made and well played, but lacks a few killer songs that would make it stick around in your brain for a while.

Even so, it wouldn't surprise me if Greybeards stuck it out for a few more albums, maybe getting lucky in the fame lottery as well.

Alan Holloway

HAUNTED BY DESTINY – 'ARIA FOR AN ANGEL' *(Doolittle)* MELODIC ROCK

Haunted By Destiny were formed in Norrkoping, Sweden by drummer Christian Gardefuhr and guitarist Johan Soderhielmhas. Stage performer Evelina Eliasson joined and immediately became involved in the writing of material and recording of demos. The band line-up was completed by bass player Marcus K Johansson and second guitarist Simon Weston and a four track EP, entitled 'Aria', was released back in November. 'Aria For An Angel' is the debut full-length album and contains the original four songs from the EP alongside eight new songs.

I was fully expecting another Female-Fronted Symphonic Metal project so was pleasantly surprised to discover that the HBD style is Melodic Rock with a few Gothic touches. Opener 'Healthy Girl' is a furious mix of riffs, keyboards and stop/start staccato drums. The song has great energy and the spirited performances reveals some quality musicianship. 'Turning Pages' has a strong melodic vibe and the hook is immediate and addictive. Eliasson's singing takes on a more relaxed feel but she still manages to convey plenty of emotion and a forceful attitude.

From then on the songs seem to alternate between Gothic and Melodic Rock and Eliasson is extremely comfortable whatever the style. The urgency of 'Freakshow' sounds like Paramore whilst 'Gravity' mixes quirky Pop with AOR-influenced passages that bring Dante Fox to mind. 'The Road' contains some orchestral and choral enhancements that adds another facet to the sound and though 'Follow' is one of the heavier tracks on 'Aria', the power and melody are well balanced. All the songs have brief running times (less than four minutes) meaning that the impact is instant and it really is difficult to pick out favourites.

Haunted By Destiny will appeal to those who like AOR, Melodic Rock or the sound Within Temptation have moved towards on their last couple of albums. The band's style has a traditional base but has been given a fresh twist and the material has acted as a nice alternative to the more incendiary offerings that have come my way during the course of this issue.

Dave Bott

MAGNUS KARLSSON'S FREE FALL – 'KINGDOM OF ROCK' *(Frontiers)* HARD ROCK

When it comes to having plenty of talented friends to call on, Swedish multi-instrumentalist Magnus Karlsson is a man with an enviable list of contacts. Allen/Lande, Starbreaker, Primal Fear, Place Vandome, Kiske/Somerville… The list is long and impressive, and he's delved into it for the second of his Free Fall projects, following 2013's impressive debut.

As before, Karlsson plays the music, produces the album and handles the song-writing, and as before he's drafted an impressive roster of top Rock vocalists to bring life to his songs. Returning faces include David Readman (Pink Cream 69) and Tony Harnell (ex-TNT, Skid Row), who are joined by Jorn Lande (Masterplan, Ark), Harry Hess (Harem Scarem), Joe Lynn Turner, Rebecca De la Motte and more. It's a veritable "who's who" of Rock, but good as these vocalists are it wouldn't be much fun if the songs were shite, and thankfully Karlsson has provided some top notch tunes throughout.

Stylistically, 'Kingdom Of Rock' doesn't hold on to a particular style, preferring to craft the songs to the singers whilst remaining heavy throughout. Tony Martin, for example, gets a cracking Dio/Black Sabbath style track 'When The Sky Falls', whereas Lande gets to use his full power on the title track.

Even Karlsson himself sings on a couple of songs, proving himself to be a gifted vocalist amongst his plethora of other talents, with 'I Am Coming For You' delivering a great AOR tune. De La Motte, the only female vocalist, is given a really sweet power ballad that's enlivened by a proper widdly solo by Karlsson.

'Kingdom Of Rock' may have a cliché title and a cover to match, but contained within are eleven songs that ooze class and creativity. Whilst all the songs are firmly in the Rock bracket, they are different enough from each other to keep in fresh after several listens, with the different vocalists allowing each song to shine on its own merits.

Magnus Karlsson should be proud of delivering a real gem of an album, just one in his ever expanding collection of works.

Alan Holloway

HUNTRESS – 'STATIC' *(Napalm)* HEAVY METAL

The ghastly cover, featuring a grimacing cartoon of some sort of evil witch, did not put me in a positive frame of mind for Huntress' third release. Of course, you shouldn't judge an album by its cover (unless said cover has the word 'Beiber' anywhere on it) and it didn't take long for me to realize that Huntress are not only a Heavy Metal band, but that they are a bloody good Heavy Metal band at times.

The instant hook of Huntress is singer Jill Janus, who is not only very easy on the eye but also has a very powerful tenor voice that is controlled beautifully. As the music behind her rattles along like Judas Priest clubbing with Megadeth, her voice cuts through it like a razor.

The album is a pretty basic Heavy Metal piece, but it has to be said that the vocals are what makes it better than some of its contemporaries, especially when combined with some of the better tracks. The only real disappointment is the title track, which is an eight minute Doomfest that drags like a dog with no legs. Apart from that, it's all high energy, guitar-filled, head-banging pile-driving material, so there's still nearly forty minutes of cool stuff if you, like me, aren't too keen on the "ploddier" Metal stuff.

As a fan of Rock music, it's hard for me not to enjoy 'Static', as it's an incredibly solid offering. There's nothing that really strikes me like a bolt from the blue, but when the album is on, the time goes by pretty fast (apart from the title track) and it's a genuinely enjoyable slab of Metal that could have been released any time in the last forty years and still be well appreciated.

Alan Holloway

IMMENSION – 'IN VAIN' *(Independent)* HEAVY METAL

'In Vain' is the debut album from Thrash Metal band Immension, a trio who hail from the Bay Area of Sheffield and consist of vocalist/guitarist Jake Hetfield, guitarist Tim Hammett and drummer Jonni Ulrich. It features excellent tracks like "Fight Fire In Vain", "For Whom The Fantasy Tolls", "All That Remains (Sanitarium)", "Lost And Battery", "In The Dead Of Creeping Death"… I think you can see where I'm going with this…

Don't get me wrong, this is a decent album by an obviously talented bunch of young lads, but Immension are truly lacking an identity of their own, as they seem to be content in merely aping eighties Metallica – the obvious similarity in Jake Kearsley's voice to that of James Hetfield clearly doesn't help the fact. Problem is, if I wanted to listen to eighties-era Metallica, I'm more than likely to reach for 'Ride The Lightning' or 'Master Of Puppets' than 'In Vain'.

The fine piano-led semi-ballad 'Love Never Dies' is the one cut that manages to steer away from San Francisco's finest Thrashers – I would like to hear more of Immension honing their talent in this way and coming up with more diverse material and stamping more of their own personality on their music.

Closing track 'The Father You Will Never Be' is 'The Thing That Should Not Be'…

Ant Heeks

MARTINA EDOFF – 'UNITY' *(Into)* — MELODIC ROCK

Martina Edoff returns with her second solo album 'Unity' following on from the self-titled debut a year ago. Having spent most of her career either writing or performing with "Chart" acts such as Dr. Alban, Ace Of Base and E-Type, Edoff now returns to her "roots" as her heart was never in what she was doing previously. Strange claim, considering she's made her career in the Pop field, although who am I to dispute it?

Recorded at Bohus Studios in Sweden which has seen action from acts such as Status Quo, Abba, Westlife and more over its distinguished history, the most surprising fact being that this album was co-produced by Jona Tee (H.e.a.t). Not so much surprising in terms of his production capabilities as he is a seriously talented guy, but with H.e.a.t being as busy as they are, how does he find the time? Of course, Tee also managed to drag along some of the H.e.a.t guys to play as well.

So what's on offer? Well on the musical front, we're presented with an album of excellently played tracks blessed with a rather sparkling production. Standout song is the bombastic 'Come Alive', a track straight out of the great Scandinavian handbook of how to write brilliant, catchy, Melodic Rock with soaring choruses. 'Love Keeps Turning Away' is yet another monster although for those with a keen ear, you might just detect a nod towards H.e.a.t's 'Emergency'.

The ballad-tastic 'Moment Of Truth' may just about rival '…Alive' for the standout honour, its sumptuous, powerful with a soaring vocal from Edoff. I say this with absolutely no disrespect what so ever but this is a Eurovision winner hands down. It's nothing short of a phenomenal performance not only vocally but musically; it's as close to perfect balladry as you could ever wish for. 'Sound Of Thunder' is yet another kick-arse stomper with swathes of backing vocals and Martina Edoff's vocals are as good as any you may wish to compare her to. The two closers for some reason remind me a little of Anastacia in terms of their more modern production; perfectly produced and executed Pop Rock.

I really didn't think that the album was going to be good, just another in a long line of "let's see who we can rope in to make a Melodic Rock album" projects that we have been subjected to in recent years. However 'Unity', despite the odd track selection which finds the absolute killers all loaded on the back end, has firmly established itself in my "Top 10 Albums Of 2015".

Roll on album number three, and in the meantime, I look forward to repeated daily spins of 'Unity'; excellent stuff.

Kieran Dargan

IMPERIAL STATE ELECTRIC – 'HONK MACHINE' *(Psychout)* — HARD ROCK

Retro seems to be the new watchword, with many an album being released these days, filled with that "old fashioned" Rock 'n' Roll attitude that bands had back in the 1970s. The Night Flight Orchestra, Blues Pills, Orchid and Year Of The Goat all have that Retro vibe going on in various guises and joining this happy throng with their third album are Swedish Rockers Imperial State Electric.

The band's mantra was to create an album that had the same outlook, heart and soul that their heroes The Beatles, Otis Redding, Alice Cooper, The Ramones and The Sex Pistols had on them as they grew up. Music that made your blood pressure rise, made you want to dance and above all music that made you feel joyful. ISE, made up of members of The Hellacopters, Entombed, Death Breath & The Solution, The Datsuns and Captain Murphy, have for the most part made an album that does just that.

Kicking things off with the KISS-inspired 'Let Me Throw My Life Away' is a bold move for the band and from this great start the Rock 'n' Roll just keeps on coming. 'Anywhere Loud', the Punky 'Guard Down' and the Country Rock of 'All Over My Head' are all beautifully constructed songs with strong melodies and hooks and they really do start the album off in fine style.

Then, once the band have got themselves in a comfortable position, they continue to play great song after great song. 'Walk On By' is something I could frankly hear the late great Roy Orbison singing whilst 'Another Armageddon' could easily fit on the new YOTG album and not feel out of place. For me though, the best song by a country mile is the (early period) Blue Oyster Cult-inspired 'Colder Down Here'. It has a beguiling and haunting guitar refrain and chorus are joined with the retro Rock this band are brilliant at, and from this musical bedrock the band build to a potent and thoroughly entertaining crescendo.

ISE haven't tried to reinvent the wheel on 'Honk Machine' and you have probably come across this kind of album before, but in the end it's all about the songs and Imperial State Electric have an album's worth of goodies for you to look forward to.

Ian Johnson

INNER ODYSSEY – 'ASCENSION' *(Independent)* — PROGRESSIVE

Not bad…not bad at all. This Canadian Prog Metal offering, their second album after a band shake-up, is really rather fine at times.

It's all about the influences and how they are put together. Vincent Lebeauf Gadreau has a real picking and packing talent which is apparent in 'Why Am I Here (Ouverture)', Rush push and Pallas keys, whilst 'A World Of My Own' delivers a Spanish-flavoured acoustic solo (with a bass solo to boot), 'My Purpose' blowing itself up to the size of a smallholding but with a definite Vaudeville feel and syncopated drums and bass. 'Lifelong Misery' is meatier but the hanging carcasses are drawn apart to reveal a trilling flute.

It does surprise and also often delights, locking in 1970's goodness and informing the music with warmth and humanity. The performances are impressive, the mix generous, the ambiance convivial; this will surprise you and delight you on multiple occasions.

A cut above much of the Prog Metal fare.

Steve Swift

INNFIGHT – 'BOULEVARD OF PAIN' *(Innfightmusic/Cargo)* — MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Innfight were formed in 2013 in Germany and started recording 'Boulevard Of Pain' in 2014. The result is a heavy Alternative Rock album, packed with thick plodding guitar riffs. The keyboards take more of a front-seat compared to most bands who use them, often opening tracks and accompanying the vocals in softer sections. With the keyboards, the band has gone for a slightly more Electronic sound, adding to the Alternative feel of the album.

'All In' kicks off fast with little introduction, knocking out twisting guitar fills. 'Liar's Place' brings in Innfight's heavier sound but it's injected with rhythm rather than just pounding away. 'Till I Fall' contrasts a tinkling keyboard with a growling, simmering guitar, giving the track an almost Funk or Electronic quality. The way the track explodes open makes it really stand out. 'Memories' instantly reminded me of Sixx A.M.'s debut album due to the haunting quality of the keyboard, the feeling of a story behind the lyrics and the climactic chorus.

Vocalist Frank Widderson doesn't explore a wide range but he has a charismatic, blunt vocal delivery which almost acts as a grounder for the often-soaring keyboards and guitar. However, the songs can often feel constrained within a very narrow melodic range; around the middle of the album it can start to feel like it's droning a bit. The guitar solo on 'Heart Like A Stone' breaks this up by running up the guitar neck, but it's a brief respite.

'Something New' delivers what it says; a chunky, jagged rhythm and keyboards like something off a spy-thriller. Closing track 'Lights And Shadows' is one of the softer tracks, using more of a piano sound for the keyboards. It's a little dreary but closes the album out nicely.

There's a lot of sound packed into 'Boulevard Of Pain' though not too much innovation from song to song. Overall, a fairly bland but competent and, at times, catchy, Alternative Rock album.

Sophie Brownlee

INSOMNIA RAIN – 'DROWNING' *(BLuEmooN)* — MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

'Drowning' is the second album from Swiss Rock band, Insomnia Rain. After the 'Black Dog' album (2012), guitarist Peter Brehm left the band and Sarah Mark joined as the new guitarist, making IR one of few Rock bands to have not just one female member, but two.

Opening tracks 'Out Of The Skin I'm In' and 'Weapon Of Mass Destruction' are fairly flat and heavy. Dominic Silva's vocals seem oddly atonal, clashing with the almost melancholic tone of the music. The higher register is definitely something he should stay away from.

'Now And Then' is the first track I really feel something for. It's more melodic than the two prior tracks but that still isn't saying much. You can hear influences of Stone Sour and Alter Bridge around the song-writing but IR doesn't have the catchiness of the former, or the mysterious thoughtfulness of the latter.

'Kill All My Friends' brings some much-needed energy and rhythm, even if it isn't very tight and a little thin. The overall effect is messy and demo-like. 'Take Me Away' is a better offering with a Pop Punk quality though again, the vocals seem to be singing a different song. The guitar work of Mark and Marijke Martens makes some nice inroads to the music here with fills and short but sweet solos. More of this variety would go down a treat.

I'm not usually keen on electronic effects but 'Always In My Heart' actually uses them very well. Bordering on similarities with Funk band Jamiroquai, this bouncy and light-hearted track underscores how Pop Punk is definitely the strongest sound for Insomnia Rain. Silva's vocals also work brilliantly in the more conversational, chatty rhythm of Rock Funk. 'Wasted' has a heavier touch to it, more akin to Avenged Sevenfold than AB but again, it's a passing touch which doesn't really do much to shape the song.

What I really feel this album lacks is polish and personality; it doesn't have its own sparkle or attitude and that's something every album needs to have.

Sophie Brownlee

JACKSON FIREBIRD – 'SHAKE THE BREAKDOWN' *(Napalm)* — HARD ROCK

This Aussie Duo deliver raw Garage Rock 'n' Roll that gets to the bleeding heart of what makes loud Rock music so much goddamn fun. Dale Hudak and Brendan Harvey's music is driven by raw, scorched riffs that are as stripped and bare as the desert outback. The music is a fizzing mix of Blues-based Rock, Grunge, Rock 'n' Roll, Hillbilly and Stoner.

They make a bloody noisy racket considering there's only the two of them. Hudak's drums are augmented by an upturned bottle bin that's miked up (of course) and the pair's vocals are often fed through a Blues harp mic to give them that amplified, gravelly quality.

This is their second album, the follow-up to 'Cock Robin'. Their debut came out of years of gigging but this disc came together quicker, with the duo committing to writing and recording sessions specifically for this record. It manages to avoid the usual sophomore slump as their brand of warts 'n' all Rawk probably benefits from being hastily assembled, as its raggedness is part of its charm.

Despite being only two of them they manage to create diversity out of a fairly sparse palate. 'Get Away' has a Grungy, Stoner quality as the riffs drive relentlessly through the song, 'New Wave' has a spiky Danko Jones edginess; it's "in your face", all bad breath and attitude. 'High Love' and 'Devil's Door' are amped up Rock 'n' Roll a la The White Stripes whereas 'Voodoo' has an early ZZ Top feel, dragging you down into the Texan mud.

Personally speaking, the best track is saved until close to the end; 'Sick 'N' Tired' starts off as stark Voodoo Blues before a riff as big as Ayers Rock appears which then goes off at a tangent, with band Rapping like they're Rage Against The Machine.

JF also throw in a couple of left field covers. The first is Queen's 'Fat Bottomed Girls' where the band sandpaper off the original's polished production and their version comes on like a lecherous cowboy singing a campfire song while the second is 'The Clapping Song' (you know the one, the old Soul classic – "The line broke, the monkey got choked and they all went to heaven in a little row boat") which works much better than it sounds and would be a riot live.

Indeed, that's their strength as this is designed to go down a storm with drunken, revelling regulars in an outback bar, whose skin and attitudes are tougher than leather and if that sounds like a party you want to join then Jackson Firebird are your invitation.

Duncan Jamieson

JEN MAJURA – 'JEN MAJURA' *(Independent)* — MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

In August I attended a rather fine event; a guitar workshop with two impressive talents, Dennis Hormes (T.M. Stevens, Dennis Hormes and The Things) and Jen Majura (Knorkator, Equilibrium, and now announced as the new Evanescence guitarist), at a music store. I'd no expectation that this day would profoundly change my opinion about Female-

Fronted Metal and Rock.

Having probably been the only one in the room who didn't actually play guitar, I couldn't really evaluate the quality of her technical presentation as such but I was overwhelmed by her positive energy, her joy and passion while playing. Amongst some Knorkator and Equilibrium-songs, Majura also presented some tracks off her solo album which impressed me enough to ask asked her if I could review it. I was of the impression it should be heard by all of you who appreciate great, hand-made, grounded, pounding, awesomely-written Hard Rock with diversity.

The self-titled album contains twelve tracks and no song is really like any other. 'And Then You Call' gives an impression of what to expect – a great mix featuring some massive bass and guitar sounds, all topped by some ingenious riffs, honest lyrics and brilliant vocals. Majura appears so delicate as a person yet really knows how to let fly when needed. The album has a varied compositional make-up including Funky rhythm parts (as evidenced on 'You Kill My Appetite') and Heavy Metal elements ('Live In Hell', 'Get Out') alongside catchy hooks and choruses you just want to move your body and sing-along to, with some virtuous guitar solos that include anything but predictable soloing.

'Expect The Unexpected' isn't another massive-sounding Rocker with a killer solo but something that could be the motto for the entire record. 'Mr. Pity Ploy' convinces with heavy, strong and dark sounding licks and a brilliant solo from Hormes, whereas 'Welcome Everybody' is a little more modern with great vocals and some phenomenal riffs.

Majura clearly proves here that she isn't afraid of trying anything experimental; the simplistically titled 'Ooh' blew me away with a unique energy and some incredible bass work, it's a rather modern track that became one of my favourites. 'Hide From The World' and 'Jaded' are very melodic, rhythmically excellent songs which only confirmed my impression of that this was one of the better releases I've heard in a while.

Honestly and personally, I can't find a single point of criticism. Jen Majura and her numerous, top-class guests (Hormes, Frank Itt, Gero "Stumpen" Ivers, Tobias Kersting, Marco Wriedt) have delivered a superb record that (in my honest opinion) explodes with authenticity, ingenuity, fantastic musical skills and limitless passion and honesty. The exceptional sound/mix is just the icing on the cake!

Julia Braun

JOHNNY WORE BLACK – 'WALKING UNDERWATER PT2' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

This is about as far away as you can get from bassist David Ellefson's more illustrious band Megadeth and yet it's no less worthy.

Alternative Independent Rock meanderings combine with heavy atmospherics on 'Comfy Slippers' or 'Gift Of Desperation' where there's a neat touch of Brandon Flowers style vocal delivery and poetic lyricism.

'Walking Underwater Part 2' is brooding and not particularly uplifting but that's not the point of songs like the Doomy 'Noise' or the depressing 'Winter In July' where the story-telling takes pride of place and even the relatively upbeat Pet Shop Boys-like 'Fallen Angel' won't exactly have you shouting from the roof tops.

Many will dismiss this as Progressive shoe gazing music but it's nowhere near as anodyne. Dig a little deeper though and you'll find enough intricacies and melodies to keep even the most critical listeners interested.

Mike Newdeck

MICHAEL MONROE – 'BLACKOUT STATES' *(Spinefarm)* HARD ROCK

One thing you need with Michael Monroe is stamina. The Finnish front-man has been singing, touring and climbing up lighting rigs at gigs for over thirty years now but he is back yet again, bursting onto the Rock scene with his latest album 'Blackout States'. And you're going to need a whole extra tank of gas for this one.

We kick off fast and upbeat with 'This Ain't No Love Song'. Monroe sounds in great vocal shape, keeping the delivery light and pacey with his usual injection of attitude and humour. Bassist Sami Yaffa (ex-Hanoi Rocks) Rocks around in 'Old King's Road', backing up the solid, headstrong riff. 'Keep Your Eye On You' is more thoughtful but never melancholy. The composition is delightfully light and layered with slips of guitar, steady drums and a rippling bass; a strong song-writing success.

'Good Old Bad Days' revolves around a catchy riff and features a silky saxophone solo that weaves effortlessly with Yaffa's guitar work. One thing about this band is how well they complement each other, and they know exactly when less is more. 'R.L.F.' is less interesting riff and melody wise but altogether more anthemic and pulse-raising. Monroe is energetic but it's still amazing how many words he can cram in so quickly, and enunciated properly too. One thing is for sure, he doesn't cut corners.

'Permanent Youth' offers something a little different to the headlong rush of riffs in the other tracks; Monroe's vocals slide and waver through the melody, something he always manages to pull off so charmingly. Sax in the solo brings some Jazzy Rock 'n' Roll and, rhythmically, it's a nice change from the sometimes ongoing monotony of guitar and pace on several other tracks.

'Dead Hearts On Denmark Street' has a toughness and edge to it that makes it stand out. Monroe's voice hardens, slicing through Karl Rockfist's relentless drum beat and there's tales of night-time debauchery and all its characters to be found in the lyrics. Closing track 'Walk Away' is one of my favourites. It's got a chorus rammed with catchy backing vocals, a verse resting on an infectious bass and guitar combination, and a simple but classy Rock 'n' Roll solo. It's the perfect track to close up such a jaunty, colourful album, still sparkling with the occasional touches of Glam.

'Blackout States' is fresh, fun and delivers Monroe's classic high-energy, Punky take on Modern Rock music. For me it was more coherent and enjoyable than some of Michael Monroe's earlier solo work, such as 'Sensory Overdrive'.

It's an inspiration to see a musician with so many years behind him still evolving and putting out original music.

Sophie Brownlee

KARI RUESLATTEN – 'TO THE NORTH' *(Despotz)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK

Where have all the flowers gone? Here, dear. This Trondheim chanteuse has apparently hitched a ride on the "Nordic Noir" bandwagon, dark and brooding, but really, this sounds just like the Wilson sisters when Heart get all Folky.

But unlike the Wilsons, this is really ordinary. It goes nowhere except to the edge of the forest mouthing "the woods are lovely, dark and deep…", then running back to a cafe and order a big mocha with marshmallows.

Her voice is undeniably sultry and is as gentle as new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn with the fate of England in his hands, but sometimes that becomes a little moribund, even more exciting 'Letting Go' wandering around with hands in pockets, whilst tracks like 'Arrow In My Heart' are winsome alright, but so pedestrian you'd have to really like this stuff to get anything out of it.

As track follows track, you will be willing anyone to kick the piano, throw the mic to the ground or shake at least one bootee. It's not just that you have to like this stuff, you really have to be an aficionado to enjoy it. And a lot of us have busy lives to lead.

Steve Swift

KERION – 'CLOUDRIDERS PART 2: TECHNOWARS' *(Beyond The Storm)* POWER METAL

Certainty not recognized as a breeding ground for Progressive Power Metal, France is the birthplace of Kerion, a Female-Fronted ensemble who have origins that date back as early as 1997. Sharing those common traits with other Progressive Rock outfits, they maintain consistent output and albums that are conceptual in nature. This time around, they are extending the latter trend with the second installment of the "CloudRiders" series.

'CloudRiders Part 2: Technowars' opens with 'Riders Theme,' an instrumental that quotes verbatim the timeless melody from the Kansas classic, 'Dust In The Wind'. Assuming deliberate in its execution, it pays a heartfelt homage to one of the greatest American Progressive Rock bands to grace the stage. Majestic at every turn, '…Technowars' delivers a brand Progressive Power Metal that is both lush and delicate while simultaneously bringing an urgency and technicality that are a signature of the genre. Clocking in at almost eighty minutes, the flow of the album is impressive and its duration seems much shorter than its actual running time. Much like Queensryche's epic 'Operation: Mindcrime' multi-album storyline, the pace of this album is terrific and never succumbs to self-indulgency or tendential to the concept. Kerion is able to weave the story in such a way that the music never suffers.

Bookended by proper (instrumental) "intro" and "outro" themes, 'CloudRiders Part 2: Technowars' is a complete and satisfying listening experience which many a concept recording fails to convey. Although slightly distracting since the musicianship is so well executed, the guitar tone lacks presence and definition. Despite this minor criticism, the clarity is clear and consistent throughout. Far from being overdone, the keyboards really add texture, mood and authenticity to the music. Additionally, the varying tempos combined with some indigenous melodies really keep things interesting with 'Riding Clouds' being a prime example.

This is an album not to be missed. Those reluctant or that refuse to find Female-Fronted Progressive/Power Metal enjoyable are absolutely missing out. Not only does Flora deliver a stunning vocal performance, there are many guest male voices who are featured to create a very diverse and colorful atmosphere.

Brent Rusche

KICKIN' VALENTINA – 'SUPER ATOMIC' *(Mighty Music)* HARD ROCK

It is, of course, great to come across bands who are very clearly flying the flag for Rock 'n' Roll. A bit of Blues, a bit of Sleaze, big vocals, kick-ass guitar, fist-pumping rhythms, "fuck you" swagger and Rock 'n' Roll attitude to spare. For some, sweet dreams are made of these and who am I to disagree?! Actually, I don't. In the right combination, these are all things I like too. But you also need songs.

The facts – Kickin' Valentina are an American band whose star seems to be rising. 'Super Atomic' is their long playing follow-up to 2013's eponymous debut EP. Live highlights includes support slots with the likes of Buckcherry, Queensryche, Skid Row, Red Dragon Cartel, Sebastian Bach, Doro, Faster Pussycat and L.A. Guns, as well as performances at a whole clutch of U.S. festivals. June 2014 saw them win "the prestigious" Georgia "Rock Band Of The Year" award. Their single 'Get Ready' is used by the Jacksonville Axemen Rugby Team in promotional material and is played during home games, while two tracks from the new album feature in Kely McClung's new horror movie 'Altered'. All augurs well, then, right? Well, yes, if you have enough good songs.

The album's spoken intro, 'Sermon', suggests that KV have no truck with Christian preacher men who decry Rock music as the work of the devil. Or, at least, they might just accept that but take the devil's side. It's hard to tell, though 'Some Kind Of Sex' and 'Dirty Girl' leave you in no in doubt where their extracurricular sympathies lie, and I dread to think what 'Fist 'N' Twist' is about. It's all very Sleaze-ridden, "dark-side-of-Los-Angeles" Hair Rock-inspired bump and grind. Cool if you like it. But you also need songs.

Highlights are opener 'On My Side' (for about ten seconds), the swinging riff and catchy chorus of singles 'Wrong Way' and 'Get Ready' respectively, the stomping groove of 'Anita' (who, apparently, everyone loves), 'Super Atomic Poster Boy' (for the title), and last track 'Dirty Girl' – not because it's particularly special, but because it's the last track. Elsewhere, 'When You're Gone' has a neat bass intro and a blitz of a solos towards the end, while 'Alone' flirts with melody and briefly considers becoming a power ballad.

Clearly, my rather lukewarm response might well put me in the minority here, but as a reviewer you have to call it as you hear it. Nice image, nice sound and nice to see such an honest and well-meaning bunch giving it a shot and starting to create a bit of a buzz. Be that as it may, my humble advice to Kickin' Valentina is this; get some more songs.

Michael Anthony

KORITNI – 'NIGHT GOES ON FOR DAYS' *(earMUSIC)* HARD ROCK

Australian singer/song-writer Lex Koritni and his gang of antipodean merry men return with their fourth studio release and their first since 2012's 'Welcome To The Crossroads'. It's produced by Koritni, but having Kevin Shirley (Iron Maiden, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin) at the helm to mix virtually guarantees excellent sound quality.

Throughout the album, the twelve tracks flit between full-on riff-driven Rockers that more than tip a hat to AC/DC (something that is surely in the DNA of many an Australian Rocker) and more commercial-sounding melodic anthems, along with a couple of classy,

heartfelt ballads.

Of the former, 'Horns Up' kicks things off in fine AC/DC style with some great guitar interplay from Eddy Santacreu and Luke Cuerden, the fiery 'Seal The Deal' is the album's highest tempo number, 'Night Goes On For Days' somehow bears a resemblance to classic Gotthard, while 'Rock 'N' Roll Ain't No Crime' and 'Waking Up The Neighbours' include spoken-word interludes that reveal Koritni's decidedly Aussie sense of humour – they won't be to everybody's tastes but definitely throw something quirky and unusual into the mix.

Of the melodic numbers, 'Try To Live (A Little Bit)' would be an obvious choice for a single with its Bluesy/Southern hints, 'Breakdown' revolves around a grooving riff and Funky bass line, while 'Carousel' and the one/two of 'The Mississippi Delta'/'Water Of Life' prove that you can put the electric guitars away in favour of acoustic and still deliver an up-tempo Rock anthem without losing any power in the delivery – very classy indeed.

As for the ballads, the acoustic guitars take centre stage again on the stylish, Blues-tinted 'Woman In Love' and 'Little Man', the latter's lyrics reflective of the fate that befalls many small towns in the current day and age.

The only blip is the tagged-on live cover of Creedence Clearwater Revival's 'Fortunate Son' as the sound quality is nowhere near as good as the rest of the album and in truth it adds nothing to it overall.

That misdemeanour aside, this is the type of album that you can just enjoy straight from the first listen, and that's good enough for me.

Ant Heeks

LAST JOKER – 'ULTERIOR MOTIVES' *(Into The Limelight)* HARD ROCK

Last Joker, originally a Brazilian band formed in 1990, released their eponymous first album in 1993. After the band broke up in 1995, guitarist Miguel Mega moved to L.A., studied the guitar and the music business and after releasing ten instrumental albums has now moved to the U.K. and reformed the band with four new members; Yves Martin (guitar) Roddy B (vocals), Al Pringles (bass) and Adam Proud (drums) making up the reformed group.

It was not surprising to learn that the lead guitarist was behind the formation of this band as the guitar is the saving grace of this album, the playing being original, lyrical and really top notch. The guitar on 'Kissed By the Lake', "Surrender For Love', 'Don't Close Your Eyes' and 'Confidence' containing some great work, for example. However this album is like the girl with the curl; when it's good it's very, very good but when it's bad it's horrid.

Opener 'Are You Ready' is standard Rock fare, with some nice spot on vocals asking if we are ready to Rock? It's a fairly good song if lyrically in well-travelled territory. The lyrics to '…Lake' are much more original and the vocals just adequate to carry what is probably a great song. However, the vocals are detuned to a level beyond most people's tolerance on a number of tracks and so unfortunately the quality of the album vocals wise is not uniform. Examples which could be improved upon include 'God Save the Heroes' and 'Sweet Sensations'.

Overall there are signs of some promise in this first release from the new line-up… however, they probably need to work on being consistently good overall. In these days when people are starting to buy songs, not albums and with so many good bands around, it is becoming more important that every song earns its place on an album.

Dawn Osborne

LEAVES' EYES – 'KING OF KINGS' *(AFM)* SYMPHONIC METAL

I've always really enjoyed the albums by Leaves' Eyes and thought that in their singer Liv Kristine, they had a wonderful leading light. Yet as much as I liked their previous albums, I always felt that they had more to give, that there was an album yet to come, where all the best elements of their music would join together and explode in a whirlwind of Symphonic majesty.

'King Of Kings' is, I believe, that release and LE have a right to be incredibly proud of what they have achieved on this album. It's hard to put my finger on just why I think this offering is so good but whatever ingredient the band has been added to their music, to help make it that little bit more special, is an elusive one but believe me when I say that it has worked big time for LE.

Maybe it's the very interesting Nordic Saga they've used as inspiration for the albums lyrics. These are based on the true events of Harald I of Norway, who tried to unite that country into a single kingdom, during the late ninth and early tenth centuries; 'King Of Kings' concentrates on the historical tale of Harald's battle of Hafrsfjord (look it up).

Using guest artists like Simone Simons (Epica) Lindy-Fay Hella (Wardruna), the London Voices Choir (Lord of the Rings, Star Wars) and the White Russian Symphony Orchestra to help them bring an almost cinematic feel to proceedings, the band use everything in their impressive arsenal to bring this story to life.

And from the start to the very end you'll find a rich vein of songs, such as 'Edge Of Steel', 'The Waking Eye', 'Vengeance Venom', the atmospheric 'Haraldskvæði' and 'Swords In Rock' that all easily nail down what is truly wonderful about Symphonic Metal.

Though the standout track on the album has to be the epic eight minutes of 'Blazing Water'; a full-on Symphonic romp with crackling guitar riffs, multi-layered choirs and full orchestration, the song gallops along with Kristine giving a stunning vocal performance which is controlled and precise one minute until she unleashes a roar that could splinter a tree into a million pieces the next.

Speaking for myself, this is easily my favourite Leaves' Eyes album so far. Everything just clicks and falls into place for me and other Symphonic Metal fans will lap this album up with glee.

Ian Johnson

LEGION – 'SOLACE' *(ZRecords)* MELODIC ROCK

'Solace' is the swansong from Legion, the eighth album in as many years from the prolific song-writing partnership of guitarist Vince O'Regan and vocalist Phil Vincent. It's great to see the band go out on a high riding into the sunset rather than limping off into obscurity leaving with one of their best overall albums.

I still feel the band would have left a far more impressive legacy had they only released four albums in that time span as they have fallen foul on a couple of occasions with substandard or inconsistent releases. I'm a big fan of the band and the song-writing and musicianship of both O'Regan and Vincent so I'm pleased their final outing is not only a strong one, but potentially their best providing a fitting end for this dark-edged Melodic Rock band.

Legion have a very distinctive sound and whilst most their albums do have their own taste, you always know what you're going to get from them. So with 'Solace' you do indeed get another slab of driven, energetic Rock with massive guitar riffs and powerful vocals all delivered in a caliginous wrapping. If you're an established fan you know to expect some killer riffs and some quality chest-beating vocals as you have become used to from the Legion song-book.

One of the biggest differences with this album (which not only gives it its own flavour but also in my opinion elevates the impact of the band) is the inclusion of Eric Ragno on keyboards. If you know Ragno and if you're an AOR fan then you know what a quality player he is, but the genius here is his keys are far more subtle than you may expect. It's more about atmospherics and subtle punctuations to boost certain parts of a song. On first listen you may not realise the importance of the keys, but if you listen to the album properly you'll notice some of Ragno's magic at work, putting a little polish on some already fantastic songs.

Overall 'Solace' is a solid, consistent album; one of my favourites is 'Torn To Pieces' which has an awesome atmospheric keyboard opening, probably the most obvious piece from Ragno, before bursting into a powerful bombastic guitar riff and an awesome chest beating chorus. This energetic and infectious Rocker is probably one of the strongest songs they have ever recorded and is a great example of Legion at their finest.

It's sad to see the prolific partnership between O'Regan and Vincent come to an end but Legion have been a kick ass band and this last hurrah of dark-edged Melodic Rock should be in everyone's collection.

Paul Woodward

LIFELINE – 'SCREAM' *(Escape)* HARD ROCK

This is the second album in a row from Escape that features two of our best British Rock vocalists. This time we have Nigel Bailey and Lee Small doing their thing and, just like the Ozone album, this is a triumph.

The singers are joined by an old friend of Bailey's on drums in Steve Clarkson and Paul Hulme of Demon and Lawless on guitars, who is simply outstanding throughout this album. Also, like Ozone, Lifeline haven't gone down the duets road with Bailey and Small each having their own songs to work on, whilst complementing each other on shared vocal lines.

This doesn't give the album a disjointed feel however, instead what we have here is a Hard, Heavy and Melodic release that Rocks. What pleased me the most about the album though is how well the two singer's voices work together. I've been a Small fan for a long time and really enjoyed Bailey's solo album but on here the two have really upped their game, with each man putting in some truly top flight performances.

'Fear No More' kicks things off and it's a master-class in how to make a great sounding Hard Rock song. The guitars of Hulme are superb and the shared vocals and harmony vocals show from the start that Lifeline really do mean business. Following this auspicious start the band continue to Rock the listener with stylish tracks like 'Far From Home', the Sleazy 'Jezebel', the dramatic 'Scream' where Bailey, Small and Hulme combine to great effect and 'Now His Angels Gone' which is a beautifully played and arranged ballad.

But the song that I think deserves the most credit, is the anti-war 'Nightmare Dream'. It's about a young soldier wounded and dying on a lonely hillside and searching for answers as he prays that he doesn't die. Strong emotional lyrics and dramatic performances really make this the standout track; just give it a listen and I'm sure it will move you as it did me.

Lifeline have to their credit, two terrific singers, twelve great songs, a dynamic production, some incredibly good guitar solos and a rock (sorry) solid rhythm section, so what's not to like? I just hope they get to tour – I know, how about Ozone and Lifeline on a double bill (come on Escape…make it happen…pretty please).

Ian Johnson

LIGHTNING – 'ROAD TO NINJA' *(Sonic Revolution)* POWER METAL

With Lightning proclaiming that they have been implored to go forth from their Japanese homeland and conquer the rest of the world, they've chosen their weapon to be 'Road To Ninja', an unusual mix of Power Metal and energetic Hard Rock. Based round the guitar (or as he's credited in the booklet Grrr) talents of Iron Chino – a riff-monster of a man and also a shred machine – there are five suitably attired (swords, leather waistcoats, eye patches…) chaps on the back cover of 'Road…' although only a Grrr, Vrrr and Drrr (I'm quoting here…) are named in the credits, so who handles Brrr and Krrr is anyone's guess. Maybe they snuck

OHRENFEINDT – 'MOTOR AN!' *(AFM)* HARD ROCK

A pure power trio, Ohrenfeindt have just released their sixth album, 'Motor An!' and it does just that! A great, high energy, straight up Rock record and dare I say – sensation!

'Motor…' is full of single-minded music and whiskey-soaked vocals. Guitar riffs that just keep pushing and a bottom end that lays down a super strong foundation – with Chris Laut insuring that we are rock solid with his bass runs. Drummer Andi Rohde just keeps those beats breaking through; strong and steady yet simple and focused. I mentioned the riffs that keep ripping up, well those are performed by none other than Pierre "Keule" Blesse and they are so deadly! These three Rock as hard as granite and when they are in the mood for some Blues, well, they Rock just as hard too!

Great Rock sounds and even better vocals! Laut possesses a deep, throaty, whiskey-soaked voice that just escalates each and every song to a higher level. Who cares if he doesn't sing in English – you can certainly understand where he is singing from! And where is that…from a pure-yet-hardened heart of Rock 'n' Blues!

Although Ohrenfeindt have undergone numerous line-up changes, that pure heart of Rock lives on! As the group soldiers on, they do so with founding member Laut who also adds liberal amounts of harmonica and Dobro – giving each journey another layer of excitement.

'Motor An!' is a fantastic slice of Hard Rock, anthems for the hardened, pure and strong! May 'Ohrenfeindt' Rock on for years to come!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

in by cover of night disguised as drum stools to lay down their parts, so no one really knows?

With some people comparing Lightning to Gamma Ray, Helloween and Sir Yngwie J of Malmsteen, its clear this act are seen as a Power Shred beast. Hence it's the natural conglomeration of all three – namely DragonForce – which often springs to mind through 'Heavy Metal (Of Destiny)' or 'Thousand Fields', while the added keyboards bring to mind this lot's countrymen Vow Wow.

'Save The Truth' or 'Destiny Destination' would be perfect as Metalised anime theme tunes, although as you'll gather from the song titles, a little of what Iron Chino attempts through his lyrics gets lost in translation, while it's obvious that English isn't really the main concern of the otherwise excellent (if a little mad) singer YUMA. Surprisingly Oliver Hartmann (At Vance/Hartmann) arrives to take lead vocals on the Judas Priest with keyboards of 'Stand Alone' (and Amanda Somerville wrote the lyrics!), the excellent results sounding like a different band entirely!

'Road To Ninja' is one of those flawed albums that's easy to cast derision upon, or even poke fun at and yet I'd be a liar if I didn't admit that it has received way more time in my player than strictly necessary. So a guilty pleasure maybe, but a pleasure nonetheless, and if like me you're open minded towards the J-Rock/Metal scene, one you'll find most to your liking.

Steven Reid

LOADED GUN – 'LOADED GUN' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

This is the first album from this band from New Jersey (not to be confused with Loaded Guns from Miami) with Ed Owens on vocals, Dave Classen on guitar, Matt Flanigan on guitar, Stevie Lang on bass and Vinnie Constanza on drums. They have supported bands like Faster Pussycat and Tuff in the States and recently supported Lynch Mob at a sold-out show in Philadelphia.

This is straight down the line Classic Rock – meat and potatoes as it were – with all the elements you'd expect from a hard working American Hard Rock band who could have taken lessons from Angus Young in all things including relations with the fairer sex.

They appear to acknowledge this with a few tributes to Young & Co in their lyrics, for example there's the line "what you do for money honey" in 'Addicted' as well as a passing resemblance to Young's style in the guitar work in some songs including the aforementioned offering; indeed the beginning of 'Slow Love' sounded a tad like 'She's Got The Jack'. Having said that the guitars are by far the best thing about the album with some proficient and pleasing solo work.

If there's a complaint about the album it's that the lyrics and vocal delivery are a bit basic and predictable, but when has that done AC/DC any harm you may say? However, with so many bands out there at the moment they may have to do a bit more song-writing wise to stand out from the crowd.

Dawn Osborne

LUCIFERIAN LIGHT ORCHESTRA – 'LUCIFERIAN LIGHT ORCHESTRA' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

This is a band who owe their existence to the talents of Therion main-man Christofer Johnsson. Johnsson has a musical passion for all things from the 1970s and he also had a vision that someday he would go into a studio and record an album that sounded like Therion would have back then.

Using the recording and production values of today, Johnsson and his compatriots have recorded and captured that 1970's retro sound that I think he was looking for, whilst losing none of the feel, power and lyrical nuances of 21st Century Therion. Luciferian Light Orchestra therefore sound like a glorious mix of Therion, Black Sabbath, Blue Oyster Cult, Deep Purple and Jethro Tull; fans of Johnsson and his music will soon fall in love with this compelling and very interesting album.

The songs cover wide ranging topics such as Faust, Dante, Black Masses and having demon sex. So it's not your average "pink and fluffy" (copyright Derek Oliver) subject matter but it's done with such energy and belief in the music, that the lyrics of the songs in the end don't really matter or put you off listening to this album. Check 'Dr. Faust On Capri', the Hippyish 'Church Of Carmel', 'A Black Mass In Paris' which features a wonderful guitar solo, 'Venus In Flames' or 'Moloch' for yourselves and you'll soon find that you're really enjoying Johnsson's take on 1970's Rock.

Of course Therion fans will lap this up that's a given but Luciferian Light Orchestra have a lot to offer fans of the other bands and genres of music I mentioned earlier. The musicianship, vocals and production are also massive plus points in this albums favour and in this try before you buy world we live in, you can make an informed choice as to whether you'll buy this album or not. Personally I advise the former option.

Ian Johnson

MAD MAX – 'THUNDER, STORM AND PASSION' *(SteamhammerlSPV)* HARD ROCK

Michael Voss' profile has gone up a good few notches recently. Vocals on Michael Schenker's 2011 'Temple Of Rock' album and a few festival performances to follow certainly helped as has the excellent Wolfpakk project having recently released their third album of Power Metal featuring several notable guest vocalists and guitarists. But for those of you that don't know Voss, Mad Max has been his band of the Classic Melodic Rock genre since 1982.

Following 2013's well received 'Interceptor', 'Thunder, Storm And Passion' is a re-recording of highlights of three albums recorded between 1984-87 ('Rollin' Thunder', 'Stormchild' and 'Night Of Passion'). Four tracks from '…Thunder' start things off with 'Fly Fly Away', one of those riffs and chorus so ridiculously simple that it works better than it should. There's British Rock influences abound on these first four tracks with touches of early Michael Schenker Group, Thin Lizzy and even Judas Priest all in the mix of the Heavy Rock of 'Losing You', the harmonies of 'Rollin' Thunder' and the power ballad 'Thoughts Of A Dying Man'.

By the time you reach the four tracks re-recorded from 'Stormchild' the sound has taken a slight transatlantic shift with the likes of Dokken springing to mind in the more melodic 'Never Say Never' and ''Lonely Is The Hunter'. Not that the Rock credentials are diluted with 'Stormchild' itself having the driving Power Metal riffs that Wolfpakk has more recently brought to the fore. Although MM is very much Voss' baby, they certainly are a genuine band with the longstanding core of Juergen Breforth (guitars) and Axel Kruse (drums) providing outstanding work throughout.

After the acclaim of 'Interceptor', to follow it up with a re-recording of thirty year old songs may seem like a strange move. But in reality, when the music is this good 'Thunder, Storm and Passion' is an ideal introduction to the band's back catalogue for any newer fans and remind the older ones just how under-rated MM were back in the eighties as the album stands proud alongside any new output. The final four songs taken from '…Passion' maintain the standard with the Gotthard style Rock of 'Burning The Stage', the racing Metal of 'Wait For The Night', alongside the Classic Melodic Rock of 'Night Of Passion' and 'Hearts On Fire'.

And as if that isn't enough for you, the package comes with a second disc with seven of these tracks performed live along with a cover of the old Sweet hit 'Fox On The Run'. They may never have been one of the biggest names in Melodic Rock, but whether you view this album as either old or new, Mad Max have got the class and the style to deliver.

Ian Parry

RADIO EXILE – 'RADIO EXILE' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

Occasionally something will sneak up and hit you so hard you wonder "where the hell did that come from"? Having received my copy of Radio Exile, just the album with no bio, I consigned it to the "will get to" pile. Having decided to pop it in the car stereo the other day, what came out of the speakers almost caused me to hit the brakes in an effort to get my bearings back.

On doing some internet digging RE consists of Charlie Calv (Shotgun Symphony – keyboards), Kenny Aaronson (HSAS – bass), Chandler Mogel (Outloud – vocals), Jimmy Leahy (guitar) and Dave Anthony (drums) with production handled by Stephen DeAcutis (John Meyer, Joe Lynn Turner, Laura Brannagan). Calv (as one of the main writers) has brought an undeniable SS-influence to proceedings; particularly on tracks such as the superb opener 'High Road, High Price' that rollicks along wonderfully and is comparable to anything from the wonderful 'Sea Of Desire' album. A further notable influence is the equally magnificent 'Road To Exile' which closes the album.

Bookended by these stunning examples of Melodic Rock at its Pompiest, swaggering best are another whole host of gems awaiting discovery such as the best Lynch Mob (circa 'Wicked Sensation' era) track that George Lynch didn't write, 'No Pity On The Highway', or the absolutely superb 'Down In A Hole' in all its galloping glory.

If I was to be picky, and I mean REAL picky, I would question the inclusion of the Queen-like 'Higher Than The Sun', which for me is out of place beside the album's other nine tracks. In saying that, it's played and delivered to the highest of standards, but is just, well, dare I say it, unnecessary.

The backing vocals, supplied by Jessie Wagner (Kid Rock, Lenny Kravitz), are prominent throughout and add a beautiful silky gloss to the release; so often a critical area that can be undervalued looking at the bigger picture.

Suffice to say, my recovery is now complete having come to terms with one of the finest albums of 2015. I did think of writing this had the same effect on me as the first time I heard Gotthard, although in the cold light of day perhaps it's not quite the same, but damn close.

This is a marvellous, marvellous album. If there is a "must have" album this year, here you have it boys and girls. It's so good Calv should refund you if you don't like it… just tell him Kieran Dargan sent you…

Kieran Dargan

MARTIN BARRE – 'BACK TO STEEL' *(Independent)* ROCK

This is the sixth solo release from former Jethro Tull guitarist Martin Barre and it may well be his most important to date.

The previous solo album, 2013's 'Away With Words', was a warm and wonderful collection of acoustic and electric guitar songs, with a few JT favourites given a new lease of life. Anyone lucky enough to have experienced Barre's live shows will know the man plays a mean Blues Rock guitar, something he has really infused into this latest release.

The title track gives the guitar full reign to let loose, it's a standard Blues Rock number in a style Barre would never have had the chance to perform in his JT days. Singer Dan Crisp continues to astound with his vocal delivery, handling both the Tull songs ('Slow Marching Band' and 'Skating Away') with complete ease.

I especially enjoyed the big Rock chorus of 'Moment Of Madness' and the approach to the guitar work really is something new from Barre. There are some wonderful instrumental moments offered in 'Chasing Shadows' and 'Hammer' that just seem to end too soon. However, the cover of The Beatles' 'Eleanor Rigby' doesn't really work as this song is so firmly established in the musical world.

The diversity of song-writing on 'Back To Steel' is to be applauded, from the steel guitar Blues of 'Bad Man' to the almost New Wave structure of 'I'm Getting Better'.

I truly think Martin Barre has found his place as solo artist in the world of Rock 'n' Roll.

Ray Paul

MARTY AND THE BAD PUNCH – 'MOON OVER BASKERVILLE' *(Independent)* ROCK

The Marty in question here is Marty Punch, a German born guitarist and song-writer who has spent fifteen years as a member of Munich-based Blues Rock band Velvet Steel. Amassing a number of songs over a three-year period, Punch recorded a number of demos at home with the intention of eventually releasing an album under his own name with a number of professional musicians along for the ride.

Fellow German Martin Motnik has the most impressive CV, having toured or recorded with the likes of Uli Jon Roth, Doug Aldrich and Don Dokken. Brit Will Jones is an online session drummer and keyboardist Robert Karasek is a music teacher, session musician and magazine writer, while vocalist David Cagle has recorded with Liberty 'N' Justice and Majestic and came to Punch after being recommended by Foreigner front-man Kelly Hansen. Thanks to the technology in recording techniques available today, none of the band members have actually met in person, but you'd never tell.

Musically, it's a straight-forward (some would say "middle of the road") Rock album that features a varying selection of styles that mostly harks back to the seventies. As well as

the predominantly U.S.-inspired Classic Melodic Hard Rock sound, you'll also find elements of Blues and West Coast that somehow occasionally meanders into an unintentional Southern Rock feel. Though the choruses aren't exactly colossal, there's a wonderful melodic feel throughout the record with some big vocal harmonies and the kind of impressive musicianship that you should expect from seasoned professionals. There are a number of influences I hear that range from the likes of REO Speedwagon, Styx, Kansas, Eagles, Chicago, Steely Dan, with a little smattering of Southside Johnny And The Asbury Jukes-type Soul.

Apologies for the terrible pun, but Marty And The Bad Punch have actually delivered a knockout!

Ant Heeks

METAPRISM – 'THE HUMAN ENCRYPTION' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

Metaprism are a Melodic Progressive Metal band from the U.K. who utilise the talents of two vocalists, Theresa Smith and Jut Tabor. Smith has a wonderfully strong clean vocal style which is complemented by Tabor's growls and rasps (though he does clean vocals too). Before I go any further, I am aware a lot of you will have dismissed Metaprism just for that one word – growl. Don't…because on the strength of this, their debut album, Metaprism are a band that have the potential to make it very big in the world of Melodic Metal.

Their songs are potent, beautifully arranged and the way the two singers work off each other is captivating and that's even before we get to the incredible musicianship of guitarists Ollie Roberts and Callum Downing, drummer James Clarke and bassist Max Willus who all play out of their skins on this fabulous release. Now for the dreaded comparisons, at times Metaprism remind me of Delain, Scar Symmetry and Within Temptation – only with a few more growly vocals.

Comparisons aside, they have in Smith a voice strong enough to give the band its own identity and she really seems to revel in the music that she is singing. 'Firesoul', 'Erase Mortality' and 'Resistance' are the perfect way for Metaprism to introduce themselves. Three heavy but very Melodic Metal songs with stellar musicianship and two vocalists trying to outdo each other at every turn, something that is wonderful to listen too.

Metaprism though, like all good bands, know that a steady diet of heavy and fast gets old quickly, so they show a different side to their repertoire on a couple of striking songs. Firstly 'Here I Stand' a remarkable mid-paced Rocker with some excellent harmony vocals and a guitar solo that really flatters the songs melodies, then 'Deceive The Afterlife' which again is slower in pace than most of the albums other tracks. Again, the melodies shine through and the whole band are on fine form throughout these and all the other songs found on 'The Human Encryption'.

Metaprism are a first-rate new Melodic Metal band, one that I think, should they be given those ever elusive breaks, go a long way. They have the songs, the singers and the musicianship to look the bigger bands who play this kind of music in the eye and say "we're here and you know what? You should be worried".

Ian Johnson

MILLENNIAL REIGN – 'CARRY THE FIRE' *(Ulterium)* POWER METAL

From Dallas, Texas, Millennial Reign is a band formed by ASKA's bassist Dave Harvey in 2010. At the beginning of this project, Harvey was in charge of all the arrangements and guitar/bass parts and it basically started like a personal matter; that said, the first album was absolutely cohesive and there was no trace of egomaniacal ambitions. Instead, it emerged from nowhere as an impressive underground classic and it became an album that really should need some proper re-issue and promotion in order to satisfy those who suffer from a Mass/Dokken addiction.

They used to be (and are still) what is commonly defined as a Christian Metal band or CCM group but, believe me, Harvey is such an intense song-writer who just can skip any bigotry or stereotypes about this genre. Indeed 'Carry The Fire' takes a step forward from the previous effort, also in terms of sound, resulting more elaborate and inclined to the most melodic American Power Metal of icons like Crimson Glory and (early) Queensryche.

The new singer James Guest (coming from Eden's Realm) surely helped to exalt this improved progression of sound with a voice that reminds of outsiders like Geoff Tate, Rik Emmet, Geddy Lee and even Steve Perry. Also the rhythm section was reinforced by the addiction of bassist Daniel Almagro and drummer Wayne Stokley and these guys did a crucial job on this album, especially on tracks like 'Save Me', a powerful hybrid between Rush and Triumph, and 'Innocent Cry', an epic voyage with hints of Arabic harmonies that resembles the most enigmatic and mysterious repertoire of CG.

'Way Up High', instead, is a magniloquent and celestial composition which Michael Sweet and his pals in black and yellow would be absolutely jealous of. Even then, there's still space for a Dokken-esque riff, like the one during 'Not On My Own', another immaculately brilliant song that makes this album perfect from any perspective. That all comes before you mention the production, which are is of the best I've ever experienced, all this from an almost independent and more than honourable band.

Enrico Navella

REDS'COOL – 'PRESS HARD' *(SPV Steamhammer)* HARD ROCK

Proving that Rock 'n' Roll has no boundaries, Russian Melodic Hard Rockers Reds'Cool, are back with their third album 'Press Hard'. The quintet, from St. Petersburg, are out to show that it is not just their football team that can give their European rivals a run for their money and with '…Hard' they prove just that.

The album consists of nine tracks of "no-filler, all-killer" Melodic Hard Rock tunes with one foot clearly planted in the eighties. The band has once again employed the legendary Michael Wagener on the production desk (he also produced their sophomore album 'Bad Story').

The highly melodic, yet gravelly tone of vocalist Slava "Spark" Aleksanov is reminiscent of the legendary Melodic Rock singers Steve Lee (Gotthard), Ronnie Atkins (Pretty Maids) and Gerry McGhee (Brighton Rock). The music is also of the same high quality as these aforementioned bands, starting with the opening track 'Dangerous One' that immediately grabs the listener's attention and is immediately followed up by the infectious 'My Way'.

My personal favourite track is 'The Way I Am' that has a UFO vibe, the band I saw Reds'Cool supporting last year, and has a monumental huge chorus. 'Brand New Start' even features the quintessential eighties "na, na, na". 'Strangers Eyes' and 'One Night' lean towards more straight forward AOR and remind me of John Fiore (Preview) as well as the aforesaid vocalists. 'Call Me' is a little more intense whilst retaining the melodies that are abundant throughout the album.

The solos and melodic interplay of guitarists Ilja "Lu" Smirnov and Sergei Fedotov are impressive throughout and none more so than on 'Love Behind'. The band are completed by Dima "Dee" Pronin on bass (and backing vocals) and Andrew Krouglov on the drums. Another feature of this album are the impressive backing vocals that are most prominent on the closing track 'No More'.

They used to say "the Russians are coming", however, I am here to tell you that they have already arrived. 'Press Hard' is an essential purchase for fans of BR, the Maids and Gotthard.

Mark Donnelly

MONSTER MAGNET – 'COBRAS AND FIRE: THE MASTERMIND REDUX' *(Napalm)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Monster Magnet will be releasing this October 'Cobras And Fire: The Mastermind Redux'. It is an alternate version of the 'Mastermind' album that was released back in 2010, '…Fire' provides you with a whole new listening experience. It has progressed and shifted to fuse variation of different musical themes with a focus on the Grunge/Psychedelic genres. If you like MM back in their Stoner Rock era, then you will very much like the change from the Classic Rock sound that 'Mastermind' previously had.

'She Digs That Hole' is heavily guitar focused, there are layers upon layers of typical Grunge rhythm guitar accompanied by their signature Classic Rock lead sound. It's not until the chorus kicks in that really brings the excitement to hearing the rest of this track; the lead guitar is deeply indulgent and "tasty" – well worth the wait. 'Watch Me Fade' draws on 1970's style keys; it provides a real succulent vintage sound, slightly akin to The Doors production, which is undeniably good and fitting to 1990's Monster Magnet.

'Mastermind '69' features bass work that is profoundly constructed in the composition, guitar takes a step back and the bass has awoken, it's meaty and satisfyingly good, like any impressive guitar solo it provides you with the exact same feeling but this feeling stays for an impressive six and a half minutes of the track.

'Cobras And Fire (Hallucination Bomb)' does exactly what it says on the tin, haunting and hypnotic, it is impeccable and effortless. 'The Titan' is all but a movie soundtrack composition that you would be a perfect fit on any psycho/thriller dark piece, maybe as dark as a Darren Aronofsky surreal film.

They have taken something that initially was good and made it is something exquisite. The attention to detail has really set the mark, even just by adding something as simple as maracas and classic piano, there's depth and dynamics. 'Cobras And Fire' is a magnetic vortex that absorbs every aspect of your mind; it's entrancing and compelling, a truly great piece of music.

Lara Kisel

MUSTASCH – 'TESTOSTERONE' *(Relativity)* HEAVY METAL

Eleventh album from Swedish Metal band Mustasch sees them once again returning to the macho carnage that has become synonymous with the band. Band leader Ralf Gyllenhammar bears an uncanny resemblance to James Hetfield both in looks and vocally but it's not as straightforward as simply saying that Mustasch are Metallica imposters.

For starters the songs are a little more melodic and the band favour background vocals to embellish the hook lines and melodies. 'Someone' or 'Under The Radar' are good examples of fervent guitar tempered by soaring melody.

There's a flow to the album and yet it remains eclectic and when they feel like it Mustasch are capable of doing subtle; 'Yara's Song' has conviction from Gyllenhammar and yet the song resonates with flow and melody.

The band are at their best though blasting it out full-throttle with the subtlety of motorbike at a church as on the frenetic 'Down To Earth' or the down and dirty 'Breaking Up With Disaster'. Mustasch don't try anything new, what's the point? They know what they do best and carry it off with aplomb.

If your taste extends to the aggressive end of the Melodic Heavy Metal spectrum Mustasch should fulfil all your requirements. Turn it up and enjoy.

Mike Newdeck

NAD SYLVAN – 'COURTING THE WIDOW' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

This is Nad Sylvan's third solo album ('Life Of A Housewife' 1997, 'Sylvanite' 2003) and the first since is involvement with Unifaun, Agents of Mercy and latterly as the obvious choice for Steve Hackett's 'Genesis Revisited' tour extravaganzas.

For those familiar with his work this album is going to be just what you expected, it doesn't stray far from the style of music redolent of those bands. It would be too easy to label this as Peter Gabriel era Genesis given Sylvan's vocal similarity but there's more to it than that; however you slice it's an extremely good album.

Whilst it's a vocalist's album don't underestimate Sylvan's prowess with both guitar and keyboards, consequently he's not afraid to let instrumental sections have their place; without exception they're splendid. Needless to say he's been able to call on notable guests to help him out; along with the ubiquitous Hackett there's Roine Stolt, Nick Beggs, Jonas Reingold, Nick D'Virgilio, Gary O'Toole and Doane Perry, amongst others. Sylvan produced the album with Reingold watching over him and he's done a fabulous job; the mix is crystal clear and the bass sound immense.

Without doubt Sylvan has produced a selection of classy songs that are filled to bursting with wonderful melodies, hooks, refrains and instrumental passages; everything to love about Symphonic Prog.

'Carry Me Home' is a jaunty opener with lovely bass, a splendid synth break and delicious harmony vocals; the bar is set very high, fortunately the rest lives up to this early promise. The title track starts with piano and vocal, the other instruments joining to great effect on the second verse. Quiet verses are juxtaposed with high energy choruses which feature some

RIVERSIDE – 'LOVE, FEAR AND THE TIME MACHINE' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

What a year 2015 it has been for Prog Rock. Spock's Beard, Neal Morse, Subsignal, Lonely Robot, Steven Wilson, Tiger Moth Tales, Arena – and the list goes on – have all released superb albums. And now the new Riverside is here to contend with and it's a stunner.

The band decided after their last release, that they needed to try and somewhat re-invent themselves, and so they set about writing and recording an album that harked back to their earlier, more Prog Rock-influenced albums. One of the first questions that came to my mind was what will the fans think of this back to basics new/old approach? Personally I think it works, with Riverside ditching the more Metal side of their music in favour of a more melodic feel to the songs.

In essence Riverside have made an album that has all the essential parts needed to make a Riverside album. The melancholic dark side of their music is still there, as is the superb voice of Mariusz Duda. However this time around everything, from the songs to the musicianship, has been given what I can only describe as an "almost happy" edge? And it's this edge that makes this release such an interesting and extremely good album.

Whilst not a concept offering, the album is built around themes of being lost and found, emotions we've all experienced during our lives. Duda himself says of the album – "The first track is called 'Lost', the last one 'Found'. If we sometimes get lost in life, we have to work at life and go through things, so we can be found again on the other side, to be reborn as someone better and more valuable".

These themes are then found throughout the ten songs that make up '… Machine'. Highlights (and there are many) include the stunning 'Caterpillar And The Barbed Wire' with its haunting bass refrain and hypnotic vocals; it's a song that worms its way into your mind, wrapping itself around your subconscious and staying with you long after the album has finished playing. And that's the true magic of this album, the way that all the songs (especially, 'Saturate Me', 'Towards The Blue Horizon', the plaintive 'Time Travellers' and 'Afloat') stay with you and stick in your head not wanting to leave.

I'm a long-time fan of this band and it's my opinion that this is their best work to date. The way the melodies, arrangements and production all melt together to form a whole is mesmerizing and this album will (I think) help to cement Riverside's place as one of the best bands writing and recording Prog Rock in the world today.

Ian Johnson

delightful Hammond Organ and strings.

'Echoes Of Ekwabet' is about the suppression of the Native American population which is both poignant and dynamic. Rich bass (and bass pedals) set down a marker before a lovely piano and string section. The instrumental passages are inspired. The required epic is the twenty-two minute 'To Turn The Other Side' and it's fabulous. Various styles are pulled together seamlessly. Again, both vocal arrangements and instrumental sections are simply sublime.

I really only had one doubt, that being the inclusion of the rather whimsical 'Ship's Cat', however it's placement after the epic track does work. 'The Killing Of The Calm' has a Celtic feel thanks to the violin, the drumming is quite superb and once more the melodies are infectious. 'Where The Martyr Carved His Name' is a fantastic song with a hint of Motown thanks to the wonderful groove and 'Long Slow Crash Landing' closes out the album in equally fine style and features Nad Sylvan trading guitar solo lines with Hackett.

Another contender for 'Album of the Year'.

Gary Marshall

NEMO – 'COMA' *(Quadrophonic)* PROGRESSIVE

It should come as no surprise, but much disappointment, that with a title like 'Coma' the ninth Nemo album signals the possible end for this French Progressive collective, or at best, a period of self-enforced hibernation. For fifteen years this outfit has delighted and challenged with their French language-led fare, a complex blend of ideas and attacks always leaving their followers satisfied and richer for the experience. Good though those previous excursions have been, 'Coma' sounds like a band desperate to leave – or temporarily excuse themselves – on a high.

As all the best albums should, 'Le Coma Des Mortels' gets 'Coma' underway in enigmatic fashion, a powering riff building across strikes of snare drum, before the trademark of counterpointing that boldness against restrained keyboards and considered bursts of bass (the latter shared by Jean-Pierre Louveton, Lionel B. Guichard and Olivier Long) already has you guessing as to which way things will go next. For Nemo are as likely to caress you with affection as they are to claw at your senses in disturbing desperation; 'Train Fantome' and the instrumental 'St Guy' keen illustrations of both.

'Comaine' on the other hand is hauntingly jaunty, an almost Sea Shanty vibe alluded to as tin whistle takes up the theme, before gyrating guitars offer a completely different feel. Suddenly the song is urgent and darting, although the bulging keys never desert the melody, this being a key driver for everything Nemo produce. 'Tu N'es Pas Seul' oozes into a more melancholic situation, the beautiful vocal harmonies (please don't be put off by the French lyrics, the vocals are rather splendid) merely enhancing the bravery of this band as they resist the temptation to up the intensity until the final throws of this near eight minute beauty. Leaving the splendid, grand Symphonic Prog of 'Coma' to close out in quite stunning style, Louveton, Guillaume Fontaine and Jean Baptiste Itier are all given the freedom to stretch their muscles, although crucially not one abuses the opportunity.

If this is the final Nemo album, then this most underrated of bands have done themselves proud and dare I say, produced the crowning glory of an already impressive catalogue. Hopefully their period of rest proves merely temporary, for what 'Coma' delivers is far too good to be allowed to slip away without a long and concerted fight.

Steven Reid

NEW YEARS DAY – 'MALEVOLENCE' *(Another Century)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Should I really like this sort of stuff at my age? I'm in my early forties, shouldn't I be leaving this Female-Fronted Contemporary Goth Rock stuff to the "kids"? In all honesty, I do find the image of this type of band somewhat laughable, with all of the menacing looks and macabre make-up – they look more like the type of bunch who will beat you up and steal your mobile phone rather than link arms with you and sing 'Auld Lang Syne'. However, the most important thing is the music…and that's damn good.

It could be so easy just to dismiss New Years Day as another Evanescence clone, but there is so much more to NYD's music than that of Amy Lee & Co., though they obviously remain as a reference point. Forays into Metalcore, Pop/Punk, Thrash and Industrial territory abound throughout their sound as the crunching riffs dominate proceedings and batter everything in their path, all the while imbuing those Gothic overtones.

It's dark and intense, especially lyric-wise, but there is a real bounce to the music that you simply can't ignore. The pace is pretty relentless throughout with no ballads to be found (one or two certainly wouldn't have gone amiss), but the likes of 'Kill Or Be Killed', 'I'm About To Break You', 'Relentless', 'Save Myself From Me' and the quite excellent 'Defame Me' are dripping with melodies and choruses you can't help but sing along with.

The jewel in New Year's Day's crown is definitely vocalist Ash Costello thanks to her impressive range and diction – I can hear elements of Paramore's Hayley Williams and The Pretty Reckless' Taylor Momsen in there, though she has enough character in her voice to avoid any really obvious similarities.

No matter how you dress it up, good music is good music. Happy New Year.

Ant Heeks

NITEHAWKS – 'VENDETTA' *(Skol)* HEAVY METAL

Once in a while you come across an album that takes you for a journey back in time, its musical aesthetics unmistakably harkening back to glories of the past – the sort of time machine that would have made 'Back To The Future's Doc Brown proud. 'Vendetta', an album recently released by an Italian band Nitehawks via Skol, is one such invitation to travel a few decades back. From the first track to the ninth, it encapsulates that classic Heavy Metal sound largely infused by the 1980's NWOBHM – with only the slight modern twist given, if any at all.

The 1980s may be long gone now, but – apparently – they've never really ended for this Italian four-piece. This fact becomes obvious the first few seconds into the album, with the opening track 'Into The Wild' assaulting one's ears with powerhouse mixture of dazzling guitar riffs and high-pitched screams. This headlong journey continues with a bit of Iron Maiden-esque panache ('Vendetta', 'Blackout In Paradise'), some NWOBHM resurrection in all its clichéd glory ('Nitehawks', 'Rocketman', 'Looking For Trouble') alongside tunes marked by ridiculously catchy choruses ('Dynamite', 'Suite 95').

Incredibly consistent at making a listener pump their fist to one song after another, Nitehawks give a twist even to the love-themed 'Never Let You Go'. A weepy ballad for over-romanticized teenagers? Forget it. It's all tight rhythm section, blistering solo, massive chorus and high-pitched vocals that are closer to those of Udo Dirkschneider or Rolf Kasparek than the sentimental wail of Bret Michaels. In shortly – it's Nitehawks all along the way, a new but worthy addition to the league of the so-called New Wave Of Traditional Heavy Metal.

Obviously, 'Vendetta' is neither a breakthrough album for Heavy Metal nor a novelty of any sorts. It's also obvious it couldn't have possibly been so – recorded more than four decades after Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin laid the foundations of the genre and three decades after NWOBHM exploded. However, it's a fine throwback to the musical past marked by huge but melodic guitar riffs, furious head-banging, spiked gauntlets and acid washed denim vests.

Having thus stirred some nostalgia as well as delivering very solid, powerful debut album, Nitehawks are the band to be kept on every Metalhead's radar.

Alexandra Mrozowska

NITRITT – 'SLUMBER *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Norwegian four-piece band Nitritt are back with a follow-up to their 2012 album, 'Noctilucales'. The band are made up of Ivan Tokheim (lead vocals, piano and keyboards), Alvin Haukedal Gusfre (guitar and backing vocals), Petter Arnesen (bass and backing vocals) and Knut Kyrkebø (drums and percussion).

'Slumber' was recorded by the band themselves and mastered by Jon Astley (Eric Clapton, The Who, Porcupine Tree). The press release with the album describes 'Slumber' as a refreshing mixture of anthemic Arena Rock and intimate acoustic power ballads. It is certainly an eclectic mix of Melodic Rock incorporating the styles of many genres, particularly Prog and Alternative.

The superb opening track 'Do It Yourself' is a little misleading, as it is high quality Melodic Rock in the vein Finnish AOR band Urban Tale. The title track itself starts with an acoustic interlude and has the Power Pop sensibilities of the brilliant Anberlin. The excellent piano driven 'Wish I Could Fly' moves into more Prog territory but with a thumping riff whilst 'Bleed' Rocks out and features a blistering solo courtesy of Gustre. 'Resolution' is a Progressive acoustic power ballad whereas Arnesen's heavy bass line introduces 'Sleepwalking', another heavy Prog Rock song.

'Insomniac Interlude' is a very nice three minute piano driven instrumental leading into another classy, acoustic power ballad, the Asia/Jethro Tull-like 'Winterscent'; I like how you can hear the guitar strings being "scratched" on this track. The dark and melancholy 'The Machine' is arguably the best song on the album. The start of the song is reminiscent of Ziggy Stardust era David Bowie before heading off into a far more heavy Progressive direction.

'Solitude' is an acoustic track that I do not particularly warm to particularly in the louder sections to which, I personally think, Tokheim's vocals are not best suited. The album concludes with the classy 'Insolence', another piano driven song, an area in which this band certainly excels.

For those who like Prog/Alternative Rock with a high melodic content then Nitritt's 'Slumber' is definitely worth checking out.

Mark Donnelly

OLD MAN'S WILL – 'HARD TIMES - TROUBLED MAN' *(Easy Rider)* HARD ROCK

With a label name like that, you can't go wrong for sure. You have to be messing with some dusty, oily, smoky, greasy, Bluesy vintage Rock 'n' Roll gang. That's what Old Man's Will

SPOCK'S BEARD – 'THE OBLIVION PARTICLE' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

As is usual, I played the album many times before reading the PR blurb that came with it. Unusually however, I actually agreed with what I read, particularly the views of bassist Dave Meros – "I think opening track, 'Tides Of Time', is classic Spock's in terms of arrangement and style, but everything else is fairly different... the whole album is still within the parameters people expect to hear from us". I couldn't agree more.

After giving 'The Oblivion Particle' many spins I'm delighted it's not just a rehash of the Spock's Beard sound but a further evolution, absolutely nothing to worry existing fans, far from it. Every track is a terrific and brilliantly constructed.

It's not a concept album but several songs that tell the fictional story of an eccentric genius, Bennett, who is the creation of the band's co-writer, John Boegehold. 'Tides...' opens with a quintessential SB theme that burrows into the subconscious immediately. The vocal melodies are infectious and both the guitar and synth solos are splendid. The song's construction is superb with several different phases all working together; a beautiful gentle passage followed by a heavy section then back into the main theme.

'Minion' has a Styx style vocal arrangement that alternates mid-paced verses and heavy bridge/chorus before moving into a delightful mid-song piano break to which vocals are added as the song builds again. 'Hell's Not Enough' is acoustic guitar-based, putting me in mind of Saga in structure, if not vocally. The bridge/chorus kicks up the tempo and are both utterly compelling. The guitar/synth breakdown towards the end is a bit different from their norm but an interesting twist nonetheless.

'Bennett Built A Time Machine' features drummer Jimmy Keegan taking on the lead vocals. The verses have a different feel although the bridge has a more familiar SB vibe. 'Get Out While You Can' has a gigantic chorus and another of those refrains you can't get out of your head.

'A Better Way To Fly' has a spooky opening before entering more familiar territory musically; the vocal arrangement being another new facet. The lengthy instrumental section offers something new as well without straying from the path of either accessibility or familiarity.

'The Center Line' offers more wonderful piano before developing into a superbly rollicking song with yet another fantastic melody while the instrumental section hints at Dream Theater technicality. 'To Be Free Again' is epic, using layered vocals in a way rarely heard of by Spock's Beard as is the slow middle section.

Closer 'Disappear' starts slowly, has a technical mid-section that may surprise a little and features David Ragsdale on violin which adds a certain Kansas flavour (no surprise).

In short, absolutely essential.

Gary Marshall

is all about (and maybe something more) and also the cover says it all.

The only thing you'll never expect is that these guys are from Umeå, a university town and the centre of education, technical and medical research in Sweden, a city which was even elected as the European Capital of Culture of 2014.

But then, at the end of the day, it's always the music having the final word and the music this band proposes is properly uneducated and fed on one of the most primordial and rude roots of Hard Rock; the bad, old Blues, of course. Hints of Free, Led Zeppelin, Cactus, Jeff Beck Group and even some Captain Beyond/Blue Cheer outbursts are spread all over these seven tracks which, by the way, contain some interesting and brilliant song-writing, not only predictable lyrics about booze and cheating women.

Besides, the way singer Benny Åberg interprets them is absolutely confident, slick and Sleazy at the same time. Not by chance, OMW also reminds me of a mysterious band from the early 1990s called Grady Cain that used to attach Blues to a kind of Sleaze/Glam approach. That said, OMW are clearly more on the late sixties/early seventies side, of that there's no doubt.

'Easy Rider', 'Ratking' and 'Got it', for instance, sound like outtakes from The Grand Funk Railroad repertoire, thanks to a production that points up their Retro Rock state of mind. Another highlight from this album is the final track and it's something you wouldn't expect, basically a long, chilled out and very intimate conversation between a couple of chords and a voice.

Though it's not easy to stand out and be commercially abrasive and catchy with, and in, a musical context like this, Old Man's Will have got that adequate amount of charisma which maybe will help them to reach an honest "cult status" at least.

Enrico Navella

ORANGE OUTLAW – 'DESERT WOLF' *(The White Label)* HARD ROCK

'Desert Wolf' is a howling headlong rush of thumping riffs and screeching solos and proof that the Dutch Rock scene is indeed in good working order, in case you were wondering. Orange Outlaw, a quartet formed in 2012, has packed as much guitar into their debut album as they can manage. Some of it's ferocious, some of it is melodic, and some of it just doesn't quite fit.

Tracks like 'Point Of No Return' and 'Getting Paranoid' stand out for their chunky, earthy bass riffs and flashes of infectious guitar. The album is about pace and over-accentuated guitars from start to finish. 'Nobody Wants Me Tonight' has a light, Country-like feel to it; this band isn't afraid to lean out the lines and really add some diversity to their record. Vocalist Sven Cornelissen especially seems to suit this lilting, melodic tone, closing the track out with some style.

'Mary Jeane' adds in a touch of the sex appeal of Glam. It's buzzing with beat and the vocals are stamped with attitude in a way that doesn't shine through elsewhere. The way guitarist Dirkjan de Wit cracks out pacey fillers during the verses really fits with OO's energetic approach. The heavier tracks have a tendency to overdo the guitar work; it bleeds out over the song and the main trajectory of the track gets lost in sidling up and down the finger-board. They're at their best when they're concise and thundering, and keep it catchy.

'To Me You're Done' epitomises the punchy riff; it's strong and focused and gives the paired down verse something to contrast with. As usual, the guitar goes wandering but it's one of the tighter tracks of the album. Equally, 'Your Game Is Killing Me' works because it's one of the few tracks on the album less than four minutes. The headlong pace might be just as fast as the others but packed into those three and a half minutes, it has so much more purpose and urgency. Even the solo has a new ferocity about it.

Overall it's a tight, well-mixed Hard Rock album with a definite Metal spirit. Sometimes it feels like Orange Outlaw has found their sound but not quite their direction, something each song seems to try and explore. Some work, some don't.

Sophie Brownlee

PERFECT BEINGS – 'PERFECT BEINGS II' *(My Sonic Temple)* PROGRESSIVE

Perfect Beings was initially the brainchild of Moth Vellum founder Johannes Luley, who, in 2012, hooked up with singer Ryan Hurtgen and set about piecing together a band who could drag Progressive Rock into the modern era while retaining a desire to push at, and expand, musical boundaries. They released their self-titled debut in 2014 to gently building critical acclaim that culminated in a Limelight Award nomination at the "2015 Progressive Music Awards".

Keen to build on the initial success, 'Perfect Beings II' sweeps in on a wave of determination, dedication and musical creativity that sees the band – completed by former Bruce Dickinson drummer Dicki Fliszar, keyboardist Jesse Nason and bassist Chris Tristram – presenting an album that purports to be both an evolution and extension of their well-received debut.

It's certainly a confident and coherent affair – the gush of Hurtgen's song-writing ideas expertly captured and given the indelible mark of a previously fledgling and mildly experimental band who've become, well, a proper band with a sound and identity all of their own.

It's not unusual for bands of bold ambition to cite a range of influences on their work, and certainly within its Progressive Rock idiom, '…II' does blend aspects of Progressive, Experimental, Classical, Ambient, Rock, Jazz and Pop music. But is it really "a firestorm of emotion and raw energy"? Is it ground-breaking? Are Perfect Beings really redefining and reshaping the future of Progressive Rock?

Well, one might edge towards an affirmative answer listening to 'Go', which is simultaneously rousing and ambient, with hints of eighties angularity and madcap soloing that turns the song into something darker as it progresses. The Jazz-infused Far Eastern ambience of 'The Thrill Seeker' gives one similar pause for thought, while the middle section assault of 'Cause And Effect' and sustained attack of 'Volcanic Streams' show a passion for the intense and unpredictable.

Elsewhere, however, the oh-so-Proggy 'Mar del Fuego', the gentle and moody 'Cryogenia' and the short and cinematic 'Samsara' set a context in which 'The Love Inside' (the album's longest track) and 'The Yard' (nice Jazzy guitar solo) do no more than is expected. The sad and plaintive 'Rivermaker' is a lovely track, but again, probably more evolutionary for the band than revolutionary for the genre.

'…II' has been crowdfunded via a successful PledgeMusic campaign. It was recorded at Luley's My Sonic Temple studio in L.A., and produced by Luley himself. All of which help ensure a warmth and almost family feel that lifts album and band above the general din and makes 'Perfect Beings II' an album to live with for a while and, yes, if you put genre-bending claims to one side, one to savour.

Michael Anthony

PIOTR WOJCICKI – 'MOON CITY' *(Andante Media)* INSTRUMENTAL

The notion of a pure form of a musical genre may soon become obsolete. More and more contemporary musicians have been reaching beyond their usual framework and blurring the lines between genres and subgenres. The classically trained Polish guitarist Piotr Wojcicki is one of such example – associated with Jazz milieu, he combines Rock, Jazz and Blues in his quest towards uniqueness and untrammelled artistic expression. Such a musical blend was a base of the third addition to his solo catalogue – an instrumental album entitled 'Moon City'.

'…City' paints its picture with a vast amount of musical colours, shades and tones. And what's more, this richness is by no means overwhelming – there's a place for both the Bluesy guitar and the ambient keyboard sound in the slow, Jazzy opening track 'Best Day Of My Life'. 'Silver Stardust' is not so much of a duel as it is of a dialogue between the Gary Moore-esque guitar and the alto, a combination that is quite surprising.

The title track starts with an Orient-flavoured intro only to develop into a composition which draws equally much from the complexity of Progressive Rock and the intensity of Jazz music. Based on a charming piano motif and ballad-ish in its nature, 'Stories From Old Treasure Chest' is laden with wistful guitar and alto flavours, with subtle echoes of Folk/Traditional music in the background. It's another track on the album that refers to the musical works of Moore, an artist Wojcicki is eager to cite as one of his biggest influences.

'Best Month For Birthday' shows yet another dimension to Wojcicki's music, a tasteful juxtaposition of Prog Rock-infused guitar and massive, dynamic keyboards that harkens back to that eighties-esque synth sound. Although slightly Jazzy in its texture, 'News From Afar' draws even more from the Blues aesthetics, embroidered with a handful of nifty but doleful six string licks.

'Blue Stone' is certainly less-guitar oriented than its predecessor, again a nod towards Jazz music. The album's grand finale approaches with an alternative take on '…Birthday', not so much the reprise of the aforesaid track as the mellow, wistful part of the entity it constitutes along with it.

'Moon City' is the third album Piotr Wojcicki released and his best so far, a fascinating resultant of his diversified influences – from Jazz, Fusion and Blues to Progressive Rock and Classic Rock. Although laden with tasteful and nifty licks and solos, it's not a typical guitar-oriented record – more focused on the substance and emotion than technical fret-work.

Highly recommended – all labels and classifications swept aside, as it's supposed to be done with any good music in the world.

Alexandra Mrozowska

POP EVIL – 'UP' *(eOne)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

I suppose I was a little late to the Pop Evil party. I missed 'Lipstick On The Mirror' when it was released in 2008 but when I heard a couple of songs (namely 'Monster You Made' and

'Boss's Daughter') from album number two ('War Of Angels' released in 2011), my attention was piqued.

2013's 'Onyx' received strong critical acclaim and I caught the band when they opened up for Five Finger Death Punch during their tour of the U.K. last year. Despite being accused of lacking originality, PE have secured a dedicated fan base and managed create a string of highly entertaining Modern Rock records. 'Up' sees the Michigan five-piece continue to entertain but initially I was surprised by the overall vibe of the songs.

For one thing there is certainly less attitude amongst the tracks on 'Up', compared to 'Onyx', almost as if principal song-writer (and lead singer) Leigh Kakaty is going through a reflective period in his life. In some ways the writing can be treated as more mature.

'Footsteps' is a quality track but not as "in your face" as the album openers that have gone before. It is a "radio friendly" anthem that should generate a lot of exposure and I suppose that is why it has been selected as the first single. If anything the snot-nosed bravado of 'Core' and 'In Disarray' may have been better placed before.

The mature writing ethic is highlighted by the accomplished 'Ghost Of Muskegon'. The hook may be subtle but it still hits home immediately. 'Seattle Rain' is a simple but effective acoustic ballad but the impact is diminished by being sandwiched between the low-key 'Dead In The Water' and 'Til Kingdom Comes'. The album does tail off during the last two or three songs, the energy just seems to run out and the ideas lack purpose and direction.

August and September has contained several big releases for me and Pop Evil's 'Up' is definitely one of them. For the most part the material is excellent and though it takes longer to resonate I still feel the quality will endure.

Dave Bott

PROJECT: PATCHWORK – 'TALES FROM A HIDDEN DREAM' *(Progressive Promotion)* PROGRESSIVE

It would seem that Project: Patchwork is an apt name as this album has been assembled and recorded by multi-instrumentalist Gerd Albers, Peter Koll and friends over an incredible eight-year period. The list of guest contributor list is extensive, including a fourteen-piece choir.

Whilst the album sits in the Prog genre it's quite diverse with a number of sub-genres touched across the nine tracks, two of which are multi-part epics. The album opens with the mellow instrumental, 'Beginning' with a delightful piano refrain, supplemented by a "cool Jazz" saxophone, the player being Marek Arnold of Toxic Smile.

The first epic arrives in the shape of 'Oblivion' of which the first half has much to commend it, unfortunately the second half features unconvincing growled vocals that are slightly embarrassing and spoil a track that was shaping up well. 'The Turning Point' opens acoustically but becomes a Euro Metal/Prog Metal hybrid rather like a second division Iron Maiden.

'Elysium' has the aforementioned choir delivering what I can only describe as an unaccompanied requiem. Mixing up the styles the next track, 'Land Of Hope And Honour', wouldn't be out of place on a Mostly Autumn album with its Folky overtones plus acoustic guitars, flute and a David Gilmour-esque guitar flurry all featuring in the mix. Jessica Schmalle's vocals are beautifully delivered. It has to be said that the quality of the female vocalists is the highlight of the album and kick their male counterparts into next week.

I'm not too sure about 'Not Yet' which sounds rather disjointed and more than a little generic. 'Every End Is A Beginning (Bau' Dir Ein Schloss)' is an acoustically driven ballad which is sung in German by Magdalena Sojka; a very fine job she does too. It's a lovely song.

'Oblivion Things' reprises the second track and features a piano and strings arrangement with strident brass and delicate woodwind adding to a very pleasing musical picture. If I were the Albers and Koll I'd have saved this track as the album's denouement but bizarrely they've chosen to conclude with what is badged as a demo (after an eight year gestation they use a demo? An eighteen minute one at that!) . 'Incomprehensible' is another four-parter that passes through the gamut of Prog genres. Big riffs abound, there's an acoustic section, a rather nice piano refrain and another guest vocalist, Melanie Nocon, whose voice suits the song, all topped off by a searing guitar solo at the track's conclusion.

For me, had they stuck to the gentler material as sung by the female vocalists this could have been a bit special, as it is it's okay.

Gary Marshall

PSYCO DRAMA – 'FROM ASHES TO WINGS' *(Pride & Joy)* PROGRESSIVE

Sometimes it's too easy to get hung up on what you don't like about a release rather than what you do, this second album by U.S. Power/Prog quartet Psyco Drama (correct spelling!) being a case in point. Despite being the reformed band's first album in nineteen years, fans of the output of the seminal Progressive label InsideOut may well be familiar with vocalist Corey Brown and bassist Ian Ringler through their tenure in the excellent Magnitude 9 alongside guitar virtuoso Rob Johnson. PD have a lot of the same reference points; good songs, great musicianship, strong musical direction, assured vocals and an obvious confidence. All this makes 'From Ashes To Wings' a no-brainer right? Well, it would be if it weren't for the poor production.

To concentrate on the good stuff, '…Wings' is awash with nice slabs of Melodic Metal that the band thankfully don't ruin by galloping through with furious double-bass drums and sub-Megadeth riffs, instead concentrating on setting a mood with studied guitar riffs and majestic Symphonic keyboards (both courtesy of mastermind Hercules Castro), whilst the rich, non-screamy Brown creates proper vocal melodies and choruses with hooks. For instance, the title track Rocks along like a less frenetic Royal Hunt, 'All That We Have' shows a maturity in the sparse verse and inventive guitar parts and songs like 'Broken Road' and the ballad 'Paralyzed' are well-written and performed with taste and emotion.

The bio compares them to Dream Theater, Queensryche and Fates Warning, and whilst I can hear none of DT and only the Eastern melodies of 'Requiem' evoke the Ryche, the more accessible side of FW get a look in on the strident 'Edge Of Forever', the superb, multi-textured 'A New Day' and the well-structured 'To Live Again' amongst others, particularly Brown's similarity to the great Ray Alder and even Evergrey's Tom Englund on his lower register.

So, in terms of songs and most of the playing the band do pretty well, but the elephant in the room will always be the really weak sound, and whilst it's obvious that Greg Sands can clearly play, I tend to like to hear the bass drum, not just assume that it's there. I was hoping it might be the download quality that was sent as some of Castro's solos sound horribly screechy too, but I suspect it may be partly the production and partly his chosen tone. If he was more of a shredder, it would be real bee-in-a-bottle stuff.

Before I'd heard a note I was wondering why musicians with a pedigree would be on an unknown German label and not one of the genre's established supporters, I suspect the album's sound is probably why.

Phil Ashcroft

REBELLION – 'WYRD BIÐ FUL ARÆD' – THE HISTORY OF THE SAXONS' *(Massacre)* POWER METAL

Much as we love Metal, it has to be admitted that lyrical clichés appear within the realms of the genre way too often. No matter if we're talking fantasy-themed tales of dragons and castles or joie de vivre of a leather-clad bikers, sometimes these themes are utilized to the point of annoyance.

Another such cliché is history, military and Medieval history in particular with the likes of Sabaton coming to mind almost immediately. However, there's still place for interesting lyrical concepts in the world of Metal. Take the German act Rebellion, who's already dealt with plethora of different topics on their albums – from Shakespearian literature to Viking history. Now they're back with their seventh full-length 'Wyrd Bið Ful Aræd – The History Of The Saxons' released via Massacre.

As befits for the masters in the art of making concept albums, there's also a certain cinematic dimension to Rebellion's newest effort. Its evocativeness is enhanced even more by different forms of expression borrowed from literary or cinematographic tradition (such as the dialogue intro that precedes 'God Of Mercy').

Evocative, picturesque and atmospheric in its lyrical layer, the album is a bloody, dark story of evolving society, its pride and tradition, its conquest and subjection under the foreign rule. The band's singer Michael Seifert tells the aforesaid story in his raw, throaty singing manner, his vocal expressiveness unrestrained. Music-wise, there couldn't have possibly been a better complement to it than Rebellion's trademark sound. From the panache of the opening track 'Irminsul' to the furious guitar-driven gallop of 'Sahsnotas' or 'Blood Court' and a tad of melody in 'Hengist' or 'Runes Of Victory', it's majestic, heavy and muscular Power Metal at its very best.

Rebellion remains less known than the military history-obsessed Sabaton and also somewhat in the shadow of its founding members' previous band Grave Digger; in both cases – undeservedly. From their Shakespearian inspirations to explorations of Viking history,

STEVE HACKETT – 'PREMONITIONS – THE CHARISMA RECORDINGS 1975 - 1983' *(Universal/Virgin)* PROGRESSIVE

While Steve Hackett has been extremely active since he left Genesis, it is arguable his profile hasn't been as high as it is at present since his first steps on the solo ladder in the late 1970s when he played sold out gigs at the U.K.'s major venues. His 'Genesis: Revisited' albums and extensive world tours that followed have certainly lifted him in the public consciousness.

Therefore, it can be no surprise that the copyright owners of his early albums have seen an opportunity of getting extra mileage out of their assets. Fortunately, this is no cynical, half-arsed, thrown-together collection but one that has clearly been given considerable thought and assembled with care. A substantial booklet and Roger Dean artwork, including many Armando Gallo photographs, certainly add to the feel of quality.

What do you get for your money? Ten CDs and four DVDs, the latter being 5.1 or Pseudo 5.1 Surround Sound mixes of Hackett's first four albums. These also appear on discs one to four which also contain his next two albums along with an extended version of the epic 'Shadow Of The Hierophant', 'Seven Of Cups' (an outtake from the 'Please Don't Touch' album sessions) and various single B-sides.

As an avid enthusiast, I already own all of this bar '…Cups' so the key aspects for me are discs five to nine which are early live recordings with the band he'd assembled for the purposes of touring. Selfishly, I wish there was a recording from his debut tour in 1978 because that holds such vivid memories. However, I can claim to have been at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane gig from November 1979 that is included here.

There can be little doubt that Hackett is a man who truly embraced the Progressive tag and in 'Voyage Of The Acolyte', 'Please Don't Touch', 'Spectral Mornings' and 'Defector' he produced four bona fide classics of the genre with a wonderful variety of material from the acoustic beauty of 'Kim', 'Hands Of The Priestess' and 'Two Vamps As Guests' through beautiful ballads ('Hoping Love Will Last') and on to Proggy gems such as the evergreen 'Every Day', 'Spectral Mornings', 'The Steppes' and 'Star of Sirius' to name but a few. There's even whimsy and a wicked sense of humour with 'Carry On Up The Vicarage' and 'Sentimental Institution' plus a nod to Punk with 'Hercules Unchained', all of which highlight his skill as a writer and performer. As for his prowess as the creator of instrumentals, that's undeniable.

What this collection demonstrates is the journey undertaken by Hackett in those early solo years, and I can't help but wonder if he wasn't subject to some Label pressure to go in a more populist direction. The first four albums are Hackett at his diverse, Proggy best with many classic tracks that continue to be live favourites, but with 'Cured' there was a definite change in style.

Aside from Hackett, keyboardist/programmer Nick Magnus and Hackett's brother, John on flute, the band had gone with Hackett taking on the vocals (not his strongest suit) and the drums were programmed. Until you get to the fourth track, 'The Air-Conditioned Nightmare' and latterly 'Overnight Sleeper' you'd think he'd gone AOR, in some ways being a precursor to the GTR enterprise that was to follow a few years later. It's still a very listenable album with catchy songs and strong melodies but maybe not what one had come expect. 'Highly Strung' tilted the scales more towards the Prog direction and Ian Mosley (Marillion) brought real drums back on deck.

Overall a package worthy of the man's talent.

Gary Marshall

this Teutonic five-piece blend interesting album ideas with epic and evocative musical background. The group's new album is thus no different from the solid recordings of their past – their alleged "furor teutonicus" contributing to it as much as their great musicianship.

Recommended to all Metal aficionados, not only those particularly keen on historic themes.

Alexandra Mrozowska

RHINO'S REVENGE – 'II' *(Molano)* ROCK

A veteran of the music scene, with stints working for the likes of Judie Tzuke, Kim Wilde and Dexy's Midnight Runners, John 'Rhino' Edwards is best known as the bassist for Rock legends Status Quo, a position he has held in the band since 1986. Not content with his bass duties, he has contributed songs to Quo records steadily since joining, with some of his most notable co-writes including 'The Oriental', and some of the bands most memorable Rockers from recent years, like 'Two Way Traffic' and 'Beginning Of The End.'

His backing vocals have fleshed out Quo's sound considerably as evidenced on the 'Bula Quo!' soundtrack and he has sung lead on 'In Search Of The Fourth Chord's song 'Bad News'. Rhino's Revenge is an outlet that sees him continue to handle bass, but also all the lead vocals, plus some guitar work, flanked by his son Freddie Edwards, himself an increasingly in demand guitar player who was seen playing on Francis Rossi's solo tour and with Quo on the 'Aquostic' shows. The rest of the band also keeps it in the family, with Rhino's other son Max Edwards handling the drums and daughter Elly Mae on backing vocals, while friend Matthew Richard Starritt adds guitar and trumpet to proceedings.

Issuing the first Rhino's Revenge record in 2000, Quo's busy touring and album schedule has seen to it that fifteen years have passed before a follow-up could be made. The music here will certainly please most Rockers, with 'Tomorrow Is Today' kicking things off with a heavy bass line and loud chorus. John Edwards' excellent lyrics are a big feature, with his satirical take on society's obsession with celebrities via the brilliant 'Famous' being a real standout. 'All The Girls Love A Bastard' is acerbic and amusing, while 'Secretary' has some excellent puns and innuendoes woven in amongst the 'Immigrant Song'-like riff. There's some real Quo foot tapping with the nod to older ladies, 'Cougar', and especially on the pounding 'One Note Blues'. 'My Name Is Stan' has a real energy and paints an amusing picture of life as a dog, and the choice of single 'Black Widows' Rocks hard and heavy.

The twelve tracks on offer showcase the group's passion and musicianship, as they recorded it old-school, all together, without computers or studio trickery. Edwards handles the vocals with ease and while there is the odd exception like the Funk-tinged 'Powerplay', the bulk of material here is good, old fashioned Classic Rock.

It's sure to appeal to Quo fans but you can extend that to anybody else who likes no-frills music, interspersed with intelligent and witty lyrics. Well worth a listen!

James Gaden

ROCK CANDY FUNK PARTY – 'GROOVE IS KING' *(Provogue)* ROCK

Linked to us because of Joe Bonamassa, that scion of Blues brilliance, touching so many different musical styles, this is his Funky freedom, a group of musical marvels who are not demonstrative but are demons with the notes. The first album, 'We Want Groove', was a tightly-plotted piece of sublime syncopation which was almost overbalanced by Bonamassa's occasionally anodyne forays.

After a pristine live album, this is different. They have stretched out a bit, modernised a little and Rocked it up. And in the process, they produce music that we like alright, but also what we expect.

Ring mastered by Mr Funkademus, Billy Gibbons no less, some of the early tracks here tend to fade out, giving the impression that they are less songs, more exercises in music. The title cut has an itchy shaking with a pushy melody, 'Uber Station' is a behemoth with parping horns and a filthy guitar, dirtying up a solo reeking with sin, but just peters out, as if the beast was frightened by a mouse.

And the middle has songs that are too long for what they are, gossamer thin or wandering round looking for action; this despite a bit of Talking Heads goodness, Salsa and a splendid Jazz Fusion Electric Joanna.

But then they find something. Disco…no, come back! There is not a huge difference from Funk and it's the energy that's important rather than John Travolta's high-waisted troos. Horns, a tasty trumpet, perfect percussion and lots of poke in 'Don't Be Stingy With The SMPTE' and a more propulsive, Miles Davis widdling 'Don't Funk With Me' and when 'The 6 Train To The Bronx' adds those unmistakable 1970's Disco sweeping strings, things take an even better turn, even if Uncle Joe's Jazzy solos almost push it to the brink.

Oh, and closer 'The Fabulous Tales Of Two Bands' sounds nothing more like Pendulum, a banging beat for them to hang shredding solos and a Classic Rock feel with some spiky Prodigy beats.

Brilliantly played of course, with all the excellence that allows them to lay back cos they've earned it, this sometimes drags those songs back to bed with them; scraps of interesting Funk with frustratingly little chance to tickle you, they only really start to breathe when the glitter ball spins and Chic rule the dancefloor.

Undeniably great at what they do, Rock Candy Funk Party have decided to shake it up a little. The shake, Okay. That rattle? Their shattered halo. The roll? Some people's eyes when they hear the Disco strings.

Steve Swift

STRATOVARIUS – 'ETERNAL' *(earMUSIC)* POWER METAL

It's been two and a half years since the last "new" Stratovarius album (2013's brilliant 'Nemesis'), but after taking a bit of extended downtime to recharge their collective batteries following the associated world tour, the band are chomping at the bit to get out there once again. However, before that happens in earnest we have the not so small matter of 'Eternal' which is, by my reckoning, the sixteenth (if you count 2001's 'Intermission' set) studio album to proudly bear the Stratovarius name!

Only vocalist Timo Kotipelto and keyboard maestro Jens Johansson remain from the much lauded "classic" line-up, but the steady infusion of new blood that followed the rather dour 'Stratovarius' release ten years ago (yep, I did a double take as well!) has certainly not dulled their appetite for grand sweeping gestures one bit… if anything it's made them even more voracious! That may be a bit of an anathema to some of the diehard Timo Tolkki fans out there (and believe me, I still think the guy is a genius), but with perspective the severing of ties has proven to best thing that could've happened for all concerned.

So having been thoroughly impressed with both 'Elysium' and 'Nemesis', what does 'Eternal' have to offer? In short the answer is more of the same… but with the usual subtle nuances and different embellishments that have become a band trademark over the years.

Bombastic opener 'My Eternal Dream' is the kind of thunderous Neo-Classical gallop we've come to expect, nay demand, from the band yet the towering orchestration and choral harmonies make it sound bigger than ever – great guitar/keys interplay in the middle too! The equally melodramatic 'Man In The Mirror' is a another tumultuous tome; it's Eastern flavour offering glimpses of 'Babylon' from 'Episode' yet at the same time dipping a toe into the kind of Symphonic excesses you'd normally associate with Royal Hunt.

The eleven and a half minute 'Lost Saga' which closes the album is a broiling epic of near biblical proportions; the kind of grandiloquent finale first introduced by Tolkki that the band have continued to excel at ever since… yet somehow it still sounds fresh and different.

Elsewhere the deliciously piquant 'Shine In The Dark', the atmospheric 'Lost Without A Trace' and pulsating 'Few Are Those' (to name but three) add depth and substance to what is in essence a veritable aural banquet!

The playing field may be much more crowded these days, but whilst ever they keep crafting albums as strong as 'Eternal', Stratovarius will always be top dogs for my money!

Dave Cockett

ROYAL MESS – 'ROYAL MESS' *(MelodicRock)* MELODIC ROCK

Nalle Phalsson's Royal Mess, an album with a guest list that looks like a "who's who" of Swedish Rock superstars; Mats Leven, Mats Olausson (Yngwie Malmsteen), Kee Marcello, Ian Haughland (Europe), Jamie Borger, Patrick Applegren (Treat), Zinny Zan (Shotgun Messiah) , Pontus Norgren (Hammerfall), practically all of Therion and a whole host of others.

Funnily enough, given the pure Swedish nature of the talent on view, the album itself doesn't "feel" like a Swedish album, it tends to operate more of a mainland European sound. There won't be comments such as "Norgren lets rip with a great solo" mainly because I have to take this at face value, no spec sheets provided therefore no clue as to who is playing what on what, so I'll let the music do the talking.

What's obvious is the seventies and eighties feel on offer. Straight forward Melodic hard Rock, no frills, no keyboards sprinkling magic fairy dust, no high tech Scandi production, just meat and potatoes, balls out Rock, and dare I say it's all the better for it.

'Aces High' is a pretty perfect kick off, a great chorus on the back of a romp along guitar riff – its party time. 'Mr Freedom' is as autobiographical as you get, gritty guitars, but given Nalle's previous disposition, it is an up-tempo riff monster offering a brighter future. I defy anyone not to jump, dance and sing-along to 'Gold Digger', a brilliant chorus – she loved me for the money – classic… imagine what Poison jamming with Treat might sound like.

As I mentioned already this album has pretty much nothing in common with more recent musical output from Scandinavia, it has its roots firmly in the eighties, with the odd nod towards seventies Classic Rock. Think along the lines of Bonfire, Thin Lizzy, early Treat with a nod towards the magnificence of Ace Frehley's classic riffs thrown in. 'Trip' pretty much qualifies that statement, but with a little Hammond Organ also thrown in. Other notable mentions include 'Hell And Back' and the Spacey ballad 'Pieces Of My Mind'

All in all Phalsson has come up with an album that wears his heart on his sleeve, and finds its roots in the fledgling Melodic Hard Rock breakout of the mid-eighties, rather than the high tech, sometimes over-produced, cookie cutter approach of many of today's acts. I'm sure this album won't garner the attention it SHOULD, but if your musical taste stems from the heady days of audio tapes and MTV's 'Headbanger's Ball', then this is right up your street.

Let's hope this is the first of many more. Quality like this is sadly lacking, but Royal Mess are doing their best to rectify that; impressive.

Kieran Dargan

SAILING TO NOWHERE – 'TO THE UNKNOWN' *(Bakerteam)* POWER METAL

I'm not sure how inspiring the name Sailing To Nowhere really is, images of a band with no real direction conjured up before a note is struck. In many ways it's a sign of what's to come on 'To The Unknown', an obviously talented bunch finding themselves sitting somewhere between Progressive and Power Metal without really being either. Add in a slightly, but never full-on, Symphonic edge and what should be a melding of well acquainted musical bedfellows feels forced and remote.

As we often see these days, this outfit attempt to get their message across through twin vocalists, one female, Veronica Bultrini and a male counterpart, Marco Palazzi. In itself that's a powerful weapon, yet Palazzi's voice proves a challenge, his rasping tones sometimes too rough for the sounds his band create, although the slightly Carol Decker (T'Pau) sounding vocals from Bultrini are far more readily palatable.

Musically the star is keyboard player Valentina De Iuliis, her sumptuous melodies, atmospheric interventions and proud clarion calls are continually impressive. However too often the music itself is happy to sit, whether bold and chest-beating or intimate and seductive, at mid-pace causing even the most attentive to lose interest as things unfold.

Add in a production which isolates the drums and causes them to sound obtrusive and cluttered ('Fallen Angel' being the worst culprit) and the undoubted talent on show becomes buried so deep that you stop listening out for it. 'Strange Dimension' does offer a more rounded feel, as the keyboards set heartfelt themes with a real sense of believability, while the energetic 'Sailing To Nowhere' proves this act can hit hard when they put their mind to it. However all too often the songs are simply satisfied to follow a similar path and reach an expected outcome.

'To The Unknown' is not a bad debut but in a musical field rammed with quality acts young and old, Sailing To Nowhere will need to decide on their destination soon, or they may find themselves all at sea.

Steven Reid

SAXON – 'BATTERING RAM' *(UDR)* — HEAVY METAL

You know with a title like 'Battering Ram' that U.K. Heavy Metal legends Saxon have lost none of their thunder. This is the band's 21st album, which continues in a similar vein to its predecessor 'Sacrifice' – hard hitting Metal with a mixture of lyrical themes from history.

Saxon have always been a people's band and often devoted songs to the fans, such as 'Denim And Leather' or 'Never Surrender'. The opening number and title track continues in this vein, the lyrics are about the devoted Metal hordes at the front of the stage at shows, the music is a furious statement to match the lyrics.

This release is an album of two parts. You have the songs drenched in old-school Metal, full of crushing riffs and galloping drums such as 'Stand Your Ground' and 'Hard And Fast' or the title track itself. Producer Andy Sneap (Megadeth, Accept) has brought out a Metal sheen not heard since bands such as Accept and Judas Priest ruled in the eighties.

On the flipside Saxon always know how to inject a melody into their Metal, 'Top Of The World' is that stand out track with razor sharp guitar riffs, a sing-along chorus that's all played at the speed of a freight train.

'Destroyer' is stupidly addictive but lacks any lasting charm; it sounds like it was just added to fill up the album. Fortunately 'Queen Of Hearts' gets things back on track and is a song about Lewis Carrol's 'Alice In Wonderland'. It has an ambience with a haunting chorus, backed by some hard turgid guitar riffing from Paul Quinn and Doug Scarratt.

'The Devils Footprint' touches on old stories of folklore and the music digs deep into the bowels of evil, accompanied by some eerie spoken word. 'Kingdom Of The Cross' continues the historical theme of war where David Bower (Hell) reads a poem through the verses, while singer Biff Byford sings the chorus. It is a track that delivers in spades.

To put it succinctly, Saxon have once again delivered an accomplished album that will happily suit old and new fans equally.

Ray Paul

SCHWIZZ – 'MY GOOD SIDE, MY BAD SIDE' *(Independent)* — PROGRESSIVE

A swizz is a disappointing experience or purchase. I remember my dad buying something from an East Coast Delboy on holiday in Great Yarmouth once, a couple of electrical items, neither of which worked at all. Not that they petered out after a few hours… they didn't work from the start; that was a swizz. My dad just rolled his eyes and realised he should have listened to that still small voice of calm.

SchwizZ on the other hand, haven't short changed us at all, producing in effect two albums for us. Of course, if the tracks within were risible, that would be a swizz too….

Luckily, this New York collective, starting as Funkateers but also adding Progressive Rock in the real, eclectic sense and with clear influences from Frank Zappa to Tower Of Power, combines the anodyne with the audacious.

Some tracks are a bit like a shredder's instrumental album – 'My Bad Side' might have an itchy Primus backing, but that guitar doggedly follows the melody line and 'Annie Pt 1' gets a bit Bruce Hornsby, but the latter, oh the latter is occasionally amazing. 'Orange Wreck' goes to so many places; Jazz Fusion, bongo central, handclaps and piano, bit of Spanish, Funk goes everywhere on 'Doorbell'.

Over on 'My Good Side', 'What Does This Mean' has a soft Prog Kansas feel in the middle, 'Slow Down' hits it and quits it on the Funky side, and allows its own calmness to push through, bass-led and with soulful female voices mixing in a Peter Gabriel style chorus.

Many of these tracks are instrumentals, but that doesn't make any difference when faced with such a great Funking fury as 'Duggan' which has a relentless film chase feel and some superb parping horns and sinuous synth. Not Rock, but amazing music and a dancefloor filler to boot; you'll find of love of a lighter Rock feel here though and if you buy in, it may delight you.

SchwizZ a swizz? Nah, this is the gift that keeps on giving…

Steve Swift

SEBASTIEN – 'DARK CHAMBERS OF DEJA-VU' *(Pride & Joy)* — POWER METAL

Many a band possess the essentials that are prerequisite of a world-class recording. However, more times than not the sum of its parts fail to attain cohesion and ultimately release something a bit disjointed. It is a rather elusive synergy in all areas of music making that is responsible for producing a magical recording.

Sebastien's debut epitomizes that spirit and 'Dark Chambers Of Deja-Vu' is a rich and magnificent album. Nothing is out of place in the arrangements, production or performances. The album delivers a hearty thirteen tracks all of which are executed with grace and precision. What's more, physical copies include two bonus live tracks for a total of fifteen and the cover of Black Sabbath's 'Headless Cross' rivals the original in every aspect. The bonus tracks, coupled with eye catching artwork, further completes the package.

The vocals are acute in their delivery and contain elements of Jorn Lande (Arc, Masterplan) and Ronnie Atkins (Pretty Maids). Notwithstanding George Rain's singing being a highlight, 'Sphinx In Acheron' and 'Last Dance At Rosslyn Chapel' are two duets which feature Marlin Rya Poemy and Aylin Gimenez (Sirenia) respectively and these add to the overall diversity of the album. While the former is delivered with a clenched fist, the latter is as delicate as a feather and a classy way to close an album that packs so much content. Other guest appearances include Zak Stevens (Savatage, Circle II Circle, T.S.O.) on 'The Ocean' and Tony Martin (Black Sabbath) on 'Lamb Of God' which he also lyrically co-wrote.

This is Power Metal at its finest and is lacking any glaring detriment. The stars have aligned for Sebastien and 'Dark Chambers Of Deja-Vu' is as close to perfection in the genre which simply works on all levels. This is nothing short of a must-have for those seeking out more quality European Power Metal.

Brent Rusche

SHINEDOWN – 'THREAT TO SURVIVAL' *(Atlantic)* — MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Three years since 'Amaryllis' meant that a new album was overdue. Your impression of 'Threat To Survival' will depend on your acceptance of the fact that Shinedown like to evolve, or your disappointment that it's as far away from its predecessor and 'The Sound Of Madness' as it possibly could be. That said, we've been here before in the transition from the Grunge-orientated 'Leave A Whisper' to 'Us And Them' and with more recent albums and it hasn't really affected their popularity.

Like many Modern Rock albums in recent times – think Pop Evil's latest album, Halestorm, or the last Black Stone Cherry album – there's been a trend for the rawer, simpler and less polished sound of reinvention.

'…Survival' replaces the overdone anthem verse chorus approach with something far more groove-orientated with processed vocals and the much maligned auto-tune no longer out of bounds. Bassist Eric Bass co-produced the whole affair but co-producers such as Scott Stevens, Dave Bassett and Pete Napi (who also co-wrote the songs) were drafted in on a track by track basis to give the songs a uniqueness across the album.

Brent Smith's vocals are the one constant. Opener 'Asking For It' is decent enough but doesn't quite seem upbeat enough to be the lead off track. 'Cut The Cord' – a long lost cousin of 'Bully' – and the Led Zeppelin-esque (check out Barry Kerch's John Bonham-esque drumming) 'Black Cadillac' bring to mind some of the more groove-orientated material on the PE's 'Up' album; the latter adding an almost Gospel quality to the Audioslave style groove.

Format crossover hits arrive in the form of 'State Of My Head', with its chinking keys and spacious drum beat, and the sublime 'Dangerous' which is perhaps as close as it gets to the more familiar Shinedown.

It's not all good, evolving or not with the arrival of the plodding 'Oblivion' and 'Outcast', the too clever by half 'Thick As Thieves' and the contrived 'It All Adds Up', an awkward cross between The Belle Stars 'Clapping Song' and The Beach Boys.

'How Did You Love' is decent enough mid-paced "radio friendly" fare but it suffers due to the one paced nature of the album and when 'Misfits' – a genuinely slow song – arrives towards the back end of the album, all excitement evaporates.

'Threat To Survival' isn't a bad album by any stretch of the imagination. If you like the fact that the band haven't produced 'Amaryllis' part two, the production is rawer and the band want to experiment and evolve then, this album will have you nodding along in approval. For those who wanting something in line with the last two albums, there's disappointment ahead and this could well be a step too far.

Mike Newdeck

TERAMAZE – 'HER HALO' *(Music Theories)* — PROGRESSIVE

It seems our Reviews Editor knows me better than I know myself and has earmarked me for quite a few albums recently that have gone on to become personal favourites. I may have heard something by Teramaze in the dim and distant past, but I'm sure it was galloping Metal in the style of Iron Maiden or Pantera and not Melodic Prog Metal, and I certainly wasn't expecting an album of the calibre of early Dream Theater, Circus Maximus, Enchant or Seventh Wonder.

Hailing from the unlikely city of Melbourne, Australia, I obviously didn't get the memo that the band had changed tack slightly on their fourth full album 'Esoteric Symbolism' in 2014, and gone even more tuneful when several members left and original guitarist Dean Wells and drummer Dean Kennedy were joined by singer Nathan Peachey and bassist Luis Eguren; the new line-up signing with growing Mascot Records offshoot Music Theories Recordings.

'Her Halo' is an enjoyable experience from the first seconds of multi-hued twelve minute opener 'An Ordinary Dream (Enla Momento)' to the equally epic twists of closer 'Delusions Of Grandeur', mixing speedy riffs and subtle guitar tones, swirling synths and beautiful piano (details are sketchy and I have no idea who tickles the ivories!), alongside fluid bass runs and skilled drumming.

But it's the attractive qualities of Peachey's clean vocal that take Teramaze into the big league. He has an appealing clarity to his voice that sets him apart from others in the genre, his uncluttered delivery among the stop/start riffery of 'To Love, A Tyrant' and soaring melodies of the title track setting him up as a star of the future. It should come as no surprise that he shines on the simplest song on the album, the emotional power ballad 'Broken', but he's equally at home with the heavier parts and handles it all with consummate ease.

Instrumentally the band are faultless too, not afraid to take their collective feet off the gas for many lighter sections with carefully chosen percussion, tasteful bass, heart-rending guitar solos and unapologetically old-school synth runs. The busy instrumental 'Trapeze' shows off their chops but elsewhere every member plays for the song to create many memorable moments.

Clear and powerful, 'Her Halo' is the re-birth of a band who obviously love what they're doing, and with the likes of DT and Fates Warning still heading off into different territories, there's a market for the kind of band they once were.

Eight melody-laden songs with a couple of lengthy epics, sounds kinda familiar doesn't it?

Phil Ashcroft

SIMPLE LIES – 'LET IT KILL' *(Bakerteam)* — HARD ROCK

Whilst the Italians may love their Prog Rock, their heritage and culture combining beautifully with the romantic and inventive classical overtones of the music, there's no denying they're also well up for a dose of good old Rock (or should that be Rawk) and Roll. And Traditional Hard Rock and Roll is what Simple Lies deliver in spades along the lines of some of the bigger names in the business – Black Stone Cherry, Mötley Crüe, Alter Bridge – all of whom give a decent reference point.

To all intents and purposes, the sound of the album is one which might not be too unfamiliar - the vocals have a familiarity in their strong transatlantic feel carried on top of an urgent guitar led foundation. They recognise the potency of a decent melody line and a chorus which has the sort of hooks which do the job they are written for – maybe a touch formulaic when you listen to things like 'Sunday Morning Apologies' and which sits on the more commercial side; perfect promo video channel fayre though. Close your eyes and you can just see some of these songs taking a retro step and sitting most comfortably in the big haired, Glam and glitzy costumed eighties, all topped off with a pair of mirror aviator shades.

'Miss.Antrophy' sees them toying with some introductory keyboard effects which also invade throughout the song, basically appearing out of place and detracting from the song. Not something the band seem that secure with, maybe just a little experiment to add variety which fortunately doesn't persist.

Thankfully, they have the nous to shift the volume dial and get a tad heavier with songs like 'Past Frames' and 'Symmetry Of Love' although the needle never quite makes it into the

zone marked "Metal". It's left to the almost title track 'Let It Kill You' which turns out to be their perfect song, to deliver the goods – a sharp riff giving way to a top quality AOR chorus, possibly the best solo on the record and something which you'd be more likely to hear from Scandinavian Hard Melodic Rock darlings H.e.a.t and Eclipse.

An album with no unnecessary doodling or diversions but a straight-ahead, no compromise series of Rock songs which, without being highly original and ground-breaking, safely fit the bill.

Mike Ainscoe

ST. PROSTITUTE – 'GLORIFIED' *(Mighty)* HARD ROCK

Denmark's St. Prostitute produce a familiar brand of Sleaze Rock 'n' Roll, that uses the template of Guns 'N' Roses for their musical offerings. You can almost imagine the low slung guitars and snarls as the band perform 'Farewell And Goodbye' on a live stage; the song is all dirty Rock 'n' Roll played with attitude but little individual flare.

The chorus to 'Red Car' is a mighty arena friendly anthem and is without doubt a future live favourite. Addictive Punk energy drives 'City Lights' so fast it could be The Wildhearts at their best – I could add so many more influences to the lists!

At times it seems the band spent more time coming up with classic or predictable titles, like 'Death By Rock 'N' Roll' or 'L.A. Party' than crafting a song of worth, after a while so many of the songs just seem to blend into one.

All is not lost though. 'Suicide Girl' sounds like something Velvet Revolver could easily have made a hit out of and 'Scream' has plenty of studio thunder to keep you interested.

Everything here is played well, and the production is very impressive considering the budget. It unfortunately sounds musically hurried and about twenty years too late to really make an impact.

Ray Paul

STRYPER – 'FALLEN' *(Frontiers)* ROCK

It's interesting that decades after their perceived heyday, many musicians are becoming more productive than ever before, but with touring taking up less time, it leaves more room for projects and solo albums alongside a few months spent recording and touring with their main band.

One of these is George Lynch, another being his Sweet & Lynch collaborator Michael Sweet; singer, guitarist, song-writer and producer with Christian Rockers Stryper. Unusually in this scene, the band still have their best-known line-up of Michael Sweet, his drumming brother Robert Sweet, bassist Tim Gaines and guitarist Oz Fox.

Counting their covers album and last year's live CD/DVD, this'll be the sixth Stryper release in as many years. Like 'No More Hell To Pay' before it, 'Fallen' sees them again reverting to the earlier, heavier style of 'The Yellow And Black Attack' and 'Soldiers Under Command', but also adding darker elements that make it even less commercial than before.

Opening with an Operatic choir, the six minute 'Yahweh' (the old Hebrew name for God) has both mid-paced and quite frenetic heavy riffs, and while it fulfils the purpose of an energetic start, the choir vocals are a bit more towards Symphonic Metal than we're used to and I have no idea how they'll pull it off live.

In contrast, the title track has an organic, gritty seventies vibe and a big chorus, although again the chorus is far faster than the verse, whilst tracks like 'Big Screen Lies' and "Till I Get What I Need' are basic Rockers with all the vocal and guitar harmonies that Stryper are known for, along with killer guitar solos from Michael Sweet and Fox, and the former's high screams.

What's most noticeable about this album is the lack of "radio friendly" tunes, with just the tuneful power ballad 'All Over Again' and maybe 'Heaven' harking back to the "hits", but the upbeat 'The Calling', 'Love You Like I Do' and the retro-riffs of 'King Of Kings' will be manna from heaven for long-term fans.

Probably the biggest surprise here is a cover of Black Sabbath's 'After Forever'. The 'Masters Of Reality' album track is played faithfully to the original and the lyrics fit in perfectly with the Stryper message, but despite titles like 'Let There Be Light' and '… Calling', 'Fallen' is heavy enough and Rocks hard and fast enough to compete with any other Hard Rock/Metal band out there at the moment.

With the usual top-notch production, a striking cover and an energy that belies they're men of a certain age, any fans they lose by dropping the lighter side of the band should be more than made up for by a new generation of Metal followers.

Phil Ashcroft

STYX – 'LIVE AT THE ORLEANS ARENA LAS VEGAS' *(Eagle)* MELODIC ROCK

Let's get one thing straight, I am a Styx fan and have been since the 'Crystal Ball' album in 1976. I adore the period of the band from Tommy Shaw joining up until the 'Paradise Theater' release; even after that they've had their moments. However, one has to ask the questions, is the world ready or does it need another Styx live album? By my reckoning this is their ninth.

Had they been promoting new material or changed their set substantially I could understand this release, but apart from one song I suspect any self-respecting Melodic Rock fan could predict the set-list without exercising their brain cells too much. 'The Grand Illusion', 'Too Much Time On My Hands', 'Fooling Yourself (The Angry Young Man)', 'Lady', 'Suite Madame Blue', 'Crystal Ball', 'Superstars', 'Come Sail Away' and 'Rockin' The Paradise' all make an appearance. I can't help wondering whether this released is some kind of knee-jerk reaction to Dennis De Young releasing his own live set '…….And The Music of Styx Live In Los Angeles' on Frontiers last year, a somewhat more expansive offering than this. Indeed, I looked up the gig from which this recording was taken and what you get here is all they played.

Consequently, the highlight is the inclusion of 'Light Up' from the 'Equinox' album which is both great to hear and a refreshing change from the predictable set-list. Don't get me wrong, there's no hint of going through the motions, the band sound as if they are giving it their all and every song is sure fire classic and at least we don't get to hear 'Babe'.

Where this album doesn't work is when the band encourages the audience to participate, or in some instances not participate. Unfortunately, one of my favourite Styx songs, 'Renegade' is hampered by the band handing over the vocals to the crowd, which is sacrilege in itself, but they then fail to pick up the mantle.

The mid-song banter is generally pretty embarrassing, cheesy and so contrived, but that seems to be an American thing.

THE MANIC SHINE – 'TRIAL AND TRIUMPH' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Describing themselves as four beards and a dream, 'Trial And Triumph' is the fan-financed follow-up to 2014's 'Let Go Or Be Dragged' (presumably by the beard). Hailing from London, The Manic Shine's debut was chock full of genre straddling tunes, incorporating elements of Progressive, Blues and Electronica wrapped in an Alternative Rock shell.

This time around things are a little more straight forward and yet no less captivating. Kicking on from songs like 'Tin Crown Kings' from the previous album, the focus is on punchy Groove-orientated Retro Rock with a huge nod toward Jimi Hendrix and Cream; checkout first single 'Haze' or 'Ball & Chain' for proof.

There's a new appreciation of memorable hooks and punchy choruses on 'Trial And Triumph', and some credit must go to producer Lee Batiuk (Def Havana) for the overall feel of the album where the retro sound still has a peppy and modern edge. The catchy 'Blind Love' and the superb Hendrix-inspired 'Brakes' have just the right edge of mainstream commerciality without being clichéd and the chiming 'Hold On' (Together We'll Be Dreaming') sounds ready made for the American market.

The musicianship throughout is top notch and with brilliant songs like the Groove Rock of 'I Don't Want To Hear It' or the pacey 'Orbit' it's clear that this band aren't simply going to go away.

Indeed with the right promotion The Manic Shine could well be the next Royal Blood.

Mike Newdeck

Lawrence Gowan does a good job covering the De Young songs and actually seems to have reined in some of the vocal theatrics that he's used on this material in the past, which I find mildly distracting.

Don Felder (ex-The Eagles) guests on 'Blue Collar Man', which I can't say adds anything and original bassist, Chuck Panozzo also puts in one of his rare appearances.

Gary Marshall

SUBSIGNAL –'THE BEACONS OF SOMEWHERE SOMETIME' *(Goldencore)* PROGRESSIVE

I truly believe that music has healing powers. Music helps when you're down, makes you happy when you need cheering up, and makes you want to dance and sing – music makes you feel. It is also a very subjective art form; you can never describe to someone else, why this or that song touches you so deeply because it's such a personal medium. It speaks to the individual on levels that no one else can understand. I also believe, even though I'm a dyed in the wool Atheist, that music can touch your soul (if there is such a thing).

Subsignal (and before them Sieges Even) are for me personally a band whose music does these things each and every time I listen to their songs. Their music always makes me feel good in myself and after I've spent an hour or so in their company, I have always come away feeling much better both in mind and body. Their new album 'The Beacons Of Somewhere Sometime' took over a year to write and record and it has had me entranced and staggered by its scope since I first played it.

So where do I begin to tell you what 'Tempest', 'And The Rain Will Wash It All Away', 'Ashes Of Summer', 'A Time Out Of Joint' or 'A Myth Written On Water' mean to me? It's possibly easier just to tell you about the last song on the album, the twenty minute plus epic title track, which encompasses all the great things that embody Subsignal's music.

The track itself is split into four distinct parts, with recurring musical themes that resonate throughout the length of the song. Then as the twenty minutes continue to turn, Subsignal draw you into an ethereal world that they have created. The song is full of sweeping time changes, glorious harmonies, theatrical guitar and keyboard fills and lyrics that speak of love, life and loss. You're soon taken from where you are, to a place where you're soon lost in a beautiful musical world that calms and soothes your many senses.

In the end there is not much else I can say about this album other than for Prog fans this is a must have, and for everyone else please do yourself a favour and just give it a try. It's striking, gripping and the magnetic musicality is simply sublime and it will do its best to ensnare you as well.

Ian Johnson

SUZEN'S GARDEN – 'STRONGER!' *(Sonic Revolution)* ROCK

It's always interesting when a band "reboots" itself and emerges with claims of a new sound and direction. Suzen's Garden, the German four-piece led by vocalist Suzen Berlin, regard their new album 'Stronger!' as "the real coming out of the band". It is, they say, "louder, more honest, more emotional", showing "who and what SG really is; a true Rock band!"

I'm not sure what Joey DeMaio or Ross The Boss of Manowar fame would make of the latter claim. "Death to false Metal" I hear you shout – though in truth 'Stronger!' is rarely anything other than Melodic Pop Rock. When it does leave its own sugary path, it's as likely to stray towards overt, quirky, danceable Pop ('Get Onto The Bus') as it is to veer towards the harder side, as it attempts to do with power ballad 'Dark Silence' and the surprisingly angry 'One More Fucking Time'.

That said, expletives aside, it's a pleasant album throughout and not at all an unwelcome distraction. Opener 'Stronger' (the track) actually sets the quality bar pretty high, with its ultra-catchy chorus and punchy musical backing. Throughout, the incongruence of the more Poppy and slightly harder material is striking but part of the album's somewhat disjointed charm. Lyrically it's something of an amalgam too, with songs tackling issues such as social injustice and pollution (check out the 1980's Synth/New Wave-influenced 'Never Leave Your Home') co-existing with more standard love songs and statements of a more personal and intense nature.

Light, bright and not at all dangerous to know, 'Stronger!' is, it's fair to say, both accessible and entertaining. Whether it has enough bite or power to appeal to a mainly Rock audience is doubtable. The aforementioned '…Time' is the only really serious contender – and is guitarist Peter Maria Schmidt's finest moment – but, you know, it takes more than a

swear word to make something "mature", "emotional" and Rock 'n' Roll'.

The nine tracks presented here are, apparently, the first part of a two part project. Given the variety on display, it will be interesting to hear the material that's been held back and to see whether part two will constitute progress towards the band's emerging Rock ideal.

Michael Anthony

THE AARON CLIFT EXPERIMENT – 'OUTER LIGHT, INNER DARKNESS' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

This is the second effort by these four Progressive leaning musicians. The Aaron Clift Experiment consists of Eric Guiterrez on guitar, Devin North on bass, Joe Resnick behind the kit and Clift on keyboards and vocals.

'Outer Light, Inner Darkness' is a Progressive work of music that combines elements of Rock, Blues and even some Jazz making this a very exciting musical expression. Very enjoyable and tasteful, this record may be understated, but it is full of passion as well.

One can hear obvious influences, from all members, like early Genesis, the Progressive sounds of Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull and others. The four combine these influences with their own interpretation of what Modern Rock is to them, resulting in a very sturdy and varied musical excursion.

Whatever styles of music we hear weaved in to this effort, the overall performances are complex, yet soulful. Yes! Soulful – possibly something surprising but reinforces the devotion these four possess.

Each musical creation can stand alone, and yet they flow and connect to each other drawing us in to a profound aural experience. Aptly titled 'Outer Light, Inner Darkness', this sound experiment is absolutely full with flourishes exploring both the light and the dark sounds of emotion.

Led by keyboardist Clift, all members give their "all" on this disc. The guitar is driven and dynamic, soaring above and intertwining with Clift's keys to produce exquisite tapestries that are then fully grounded by the rhythms laid down by Resnick and North.

Some of what we hear can be described as Power Progressive, but most of the movements are of a mid-tempo nature, constantly building and then backing away – creating wave upon wave of Modern Symphonic glimpses of glory!

An absolute perfect experiment of music blending every instrument and voice into a beautiful ocean of sound!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

THE BURROS – 'MAYA' *(Sauna)* ROCK

Sometimes we all need respite from the persistent barrage of power chords. Americana is one place to find this sort of sanctuary but there's still enough in the way of guitar and outsider cool to class the new album from Detroit-based The Burros as Rock.

It couldn't be any more different than the signature sound of the Motor City, no hint of Motown and no 'Kick Out The Jams' wig outs. Instead it has woozy pedal steel stuff that conjures up the shimmering heat mirage like on a desert highway. The duo of John Harvey and Bob Pereira are backed by some fine session musicians. On some tracks they even dispense with the need for drums and percussion.

The effect is a record laid bare where guitars chime and the vocals, clear and possessed of a good turn of phrase, take on an intimate confessional feel. The record is an eighteen track concept album (it doesn't feel that long though as a couple of the songs like 'Slacking Off' and 'Strawberry Park' are short instrumental pieces that just keep the atmosphere going). 'Maya' comes from the Hindi meaning "illusion" and the velvety, sweet melodies mask the bitter lyrics warning of false love and illusions of freedom in the free world.

The Pop Rock hook of 'Beware Of Maya' has a good example of the band's stance on the line – "you think your lover came from above when they came from some basement". Song-writing wise, and partly due to the tone of the singing, it has echoes of a more homespun Ron Sexsmith, a smidgeon of Bob Dylan and a potpourri of Alternative American influences.

A female voice (uncredited on the promo copy) adds colour to the tracks or duets on the likes of 'Daze Right Back' which works well, juxta-positioning the two sides of a relationship. 'Across The Great Divide' is a glorious, hummable piece of broken-hearted Americana and is a track that they should push as a single.

It's not an album that comes out and batters you over the head, it slowly, almost meditatively works its way in, creating a parched, barren atmosphere. Three tracks towards the end, the Rocker 'No Way', 'Written In The Stars' and the Timuk 3-like 'They Thought It Was Their Body,' add more electric guitar in case you were getting withdrawal symptoms.

David Feeny's production is warm, without too much trickery, which helps with its warts and all feel (although kicking off the record with 'Above' and what sounds like a messed up intro is a curious decision but the song does go on to prove to be a good one though).

It's the kind of record that would sound best on an old chewed cassette, in a clapped out car on a desert journey, destination unknown.

Duncan Jamieson

THE WINERY DOGS – 'HOT STREAK' *(earMUSIC)* HARD ROCK

Fans came to the first album from different directions, largely they were followers of Billy Sheehan and Mike Portnoy, both who've had fairly high profiles for a number of years. Richie Kotzen on the other hand has had a lower profile but their self-titled album launched him into wider recognition. It was largely penned by Kotzen for logistic reasons, but the subsequent touring has allowed them to gel as a band and produce the more cohesive 'Hot Streak'. This second outing is more collaborative but it still has an unmistakable Kotzen feel running through its veins.

'Oblivion' is a hell for leather, duel with the devil opener, the skill of these musicians is head-spinning and nowhere is this more apparent. 'Captain Love' is a head-banging Rocker with a riff Angus Young would be proud of and a scrunchy solo from Sheehan. Title track 'Hot Streak' has a Jazzy heart held together with Portnoy's solid backbeat while Sheehan sprints around the frets chased by Kotzen. 'How Long' is a joyous, spirit lifting "romantic" song.

It is hard to believe that these three have not worked together for years, listen to 'Empire' as they pick up the baton from each other, weaving round one and another, each having their time in the spotlight; this is jamming par excellence. 'Fire' is a smoochy ballad with a gorgeous South American feel. 'Ghost Town', 'The Bridge' and 'War Machine' all tap into many genres and spit them out into a distinctive TWD sound.

'Spiral' grooves around in circles while Funking it up in the background. 'Devil You Know' Rocks it up and the slower melody distracts from the F1 performance going on in the background. A change of pace brings the Bluesy, slightly Beatle-esque 'Think It Over' and the album signs off with 'The Lamb', another song that grooves along to the conclusion.

If you are fans of the individual TWD, you will love what they bring to 'Hot Streak', but as a fully-fledged band they are so much more. Superficially this is an album of great songs with a wide appeal to lovers of different genres but it's when you peel back the layers you reach the complexity; this is an album you will listen to for years and hear something new every time.

For me what comes across is, while it is self-produced… it is not over produced, the album is not created from in-dropping the best takes, you know that The Winery Dogs can deliver this live (I can vouch for this), once again proving that sometimes a three-piece can produce the most momentous music.

Helen Bradley Owers

THE DELTA SAINTS – 'BONES' *(Loud & Proud)* BLUES/SOUL

If it keeps on raining, yes, that levee will indeed break. The Delta Saints, resident in that melting pot of musical sounds Nashville, might just be the sound after the water has carried all before it and bleached the landscape. They have influences of The Black Keys (of course), The White Stripes, Led Zeppelin, My Morning Jacket and Band Of Horses; unusually, you can hear all those influences on this second full-release.

Yes. That is true. There is a Blues Du Jour dirty, Noir, bubbling Gumbo feel to this music. But get this. There is much more than that here. TDS have realised that it is no good to bang like a tavern door when the fleet's in, this is about groove too.

And so, the wonderful great rolling vibe of 'Heavy Hammer' with Rival Sons hip shaking chorus really makes you move and the shuffling Jack White Gumbo Blues of 'Zydeco' is so beautifully cool you will want to kiss it. They also know when to strap on a six-stringer and fire off some Wolfmother 1960's Psyche sang froid. This is 'Soft Spoken' and they do it with a sassiness linked to a mournful piano and rigid riffing; 'Into The Morning' has a driving, 1970's vibe with the woosiness of whirling round in a frenzy; abandon but with care.

There of course is that Atmos Blues if you really want it; 'Bones' has muddy percussion and a piping organ, 'Dust' shows some handclaps and authentic Gospel Blues attempt, before a hollering RS and piano/organ interplay take it somewhere so much better.

Ben Ringel's pipes would delight a congregation, Nate Kremer and Dylan Fitch's solos would tickle Scott Holliday, the band could thrill the general populace. Very Kill It Kid with great Classic Rock chops, the Delta Saints are close to perfect. Call the pastor, these saints need to be canonised.

Steve Swift

THE JEFFREY BROTHERS BAND – 'LETS ROCK LETS ROLL' *(Rok Cartel)* HARD ROCK

The Jeffrey Brothers Band was formed in 2000 by twin brother Josh Jeffrey (guitar/vocals) and Nick Jeffrey (drums/backing vocals) in Midland, Ontario. Their debut EP 'Splitting Headache' came out in 2004 and went on to sell ten thousand on the back of constant touring (a lesson to be learned there for many European bands!). Their first album 'Cuttin' Loose' was released in 2010, and some of their songs went on to grace several TV shows, including the awesome 'Sons Of Anarchy'. Which leads up to 2015 and the release of their sophomore album 'Lets Rock Lets Roll' (complete with mysteriously missing apostrophes).

Okay, enough of the history lesson – how does the band sound? To be honest, they caught me on the hop with opening number and recent single 'Drivin' Me Wild'. When the glorious riff started I was thinking we were in for some wonderful Worrall-like Melodic Rock, but then the vocals kicked in and I was like, "hmmmm, no, this isn't really anything like Worrall". On listening to the full album, things become very clear, very quickly.

The Jeffrey Brothers really do worship at the altar of AC/DC, their love of this band infusing virtually every beat of this album, even down to AC/DC's predilection for boring, repetitive choruses. Let's be clear – these boys can write a monster, catchy riff, as clearly show-cased on the likes of 'Driven Me Wild', 'Pink Panties', 'Choked' and 'Rock Star'. Good choruses not so much; the consecutive numbers '7/11', 'Casting Out My Line' and 'Bring Me Down' ramming this point home very early on the album.

To be fair, I can imagine many of these songs being great live, really getting the crowd into their good-time, straight-ahead, no frills 1970's Hard Rock. But for listening pleasure at home or in the car, I really need something more interesting and memorable. If song-writer Josh Jeffrey could just marry his propensity for a great riff with some memorable hook-laden choruses, these boys could really open up some doors. The production is already excellent with the instrumentation hard-hitting and "in your face". They just need some memorable choruses thrown into the mix to make the next step up.

Bruce Mee

THE JOKERS – 'HURRICANE' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* HARD ROCK

A four-piece hailing from England, consisting of Paul Hurst (guitar), Phil Hartley (bass) Wayne Parry (vocals) and Dan Evans (drums) that have been on the circuit for many years, however this album may just be the release to make people sit up and take a little more notice.

Taking more of a traditional approach, album opener 'Run 4 Cover' isn't the rip-roaring monster the title suggests but more of a mix of a "Spacier" Mr Big, particularly with Hurst's guitar riff echoing – that of a certain Paul Gilbert. The title track is a little more straightforward, with a slinky Rocking groove adding a little spice to the retro vibe echoing perhaps a little early Black Crowes.

Special word also for the rootsy 'Her Word Is Love' a magnificent little ditty, fantastic groovy riff, with Hurst's vocals uncannily reminiscent of Ed Kowalczyk (Live) and not too far away from what Kowalczyk used to do for his day job. These days it seems almost everyone is pigeon-holed to some degree, one thing for sure is The Jokers can't be lumped in with any one sub-genre, they are way too clever and diverse for that.

In using the word diverse, I use it as a huge compliment in as much as it's not cookie

cutter, by the numbers, formulaic, over produced, nicey nicey Hard Rock, it's entirely the opposite; rootsy, driven, Bluesy, old-school, well played , laid back , up-tempo, groove-laden Hard Rock of the highest quality. I have to admit, to my shame, I have missed their first two albums, but given the strength and depth of 'Hurricane', I intend to remedy that oversight sooner rather than later.

Before I close, I fell I must mention the absolutely fantastic vocal arrangements, a joy to behold, obviously this band haven't heard of auto tune as they have absolutely no need of it. Imagine the BC, Live, Thunder and Bad Company jamming, well this might be damn close to the outcome.

What a wonderful surprise; a superb album, deserving of a home in your collection sooner rather than later.

Kieran Dargan

THE LIZARDS – 'REPTILICUS MAXIMUS' *(Hyperspace/Rocker)* HARD ROCK

Considering they boast an ex-member of Rainbow, Black Sabbath and Blue Oyster Cult (in the shape of Bobby Rondinelli) and Riot (via Mike DiMeo), The Lizards have, when you take into account that 'Reptilicus Maximus' is their seventh release, somehow gone largely unnoticed. The band is completed by bassist Randy Pratt and guitarist Patrick Klein and between them the foursome have created a Classic Rock sound that moves seamlessly from early Whitesnake to Bad Company, right through to early and mid-period Rainbow. Vitally with so many bands keen to claim that style for their own, TL manage to add a touch variance in that they achieve all of this with less bombast and a far more relaxed air than you might expect.

Anyone familiar with Rondinelli's rhythmical ruminations will immediately know this outfit are in safe hands, as he powers and pounds his way through the staccato Dio era Rainbow of 'In The Pleasure Dome', while few drummers can truly lay down a groove like that found on the Snake/Rainbow mash-up of 'Wild West'. DiMeo doesn't disappoint either, his throaty roar a formidable force that means he never needs to ape the singers that made these styles their own many years ago. Although there is, at times, a touch of Paul Rodgers in his delivery; check out 'Turnin' Me Under' for proof.

Crucially Klein and Pratt prove worthy equals for their more illustrious band-mates, the guitars proud yet not over-polished with the bass booming and bold. If all that wasn't enough on its own, the guest list (you knew there'd be a guest list, right?) finds guitarist Frank Marino twinkling his 'Evil Eyes', while Vinnie Moore of UFO rushes headlong into 'Crash' with dazzling results. However when Glenn Hughes rekindles his involvement with this act, it's possibly his 'Miracle Man' duet with DiMeo which really stands out.

I know we are once again awash with bands touting Classic Rock as their own. Yet when an outfit like The Lizards arrives with a real and undoubted pedigree, this genre still makes you sit up and take notice.

Steven Reid

THE RADIO SUN – 'HEAVEN OR HEARTBREAK' *(MelodicRock)* MELODIC ROCK

It seems like only yesterday that I had the privilege of reviewing the debut album, ('Wrong Things Right') from this Antipodean four-piece (issue #65). The bottom line of that review basically described the album as "a solid foundation from which to build from". Now, just twelve months on we have their sophomore offering 'Heaven Or Heartbreak' bestowed upon us. It flaunts an impressive piece of front artwork that has an immediate visual impact which screams out, "Buy! Buy! Buy!" But, has it got the music to match?

The first noticeable difference when "play" is pressed is that Jason Old (vocals, guitars), Steve Janevski (guitars, vocals), Robbie Erdmanis (bass, vocals) and Ben Wignall (drums, keys and vocals) have upped the ante in substantial fashion. Yes, the luscious four-part harmonies are still rampant throughout, and Janevski's dexterous guitar skills shine as bright as ever; but there now appears to be a greater maturity and depth in both the musicianship and song-writing departments.

The punchy Power Pop embellishments of the debut album (an understandable influence from their Square One days) have dissipated somewhat and in their place there breathes a tighter, heavier sound with carefully crafted lyrical content. It's no secret that the band have an affiliation with, and have had expert guidance from Paul Laine (Shugaazer, Danger Danger, Darkhorse, solo), and on 'Heaven Or Heartbreak' his continued input is irrefutable; more so than the debut. Once again Laine has mixed the album; he's co-written three songs and shares the lead vocals on 'Science Fiction Make Believe', a song that has a dark underpinning DD – 'The Return Of The Great Gildersleeves' – type riff that blossoms into a typical TRS chorus, oozing harmony and melody. These sonic traits are palpable throughout the entire album.

But it's the impressive 'Caught Between Heaven And A Heartbreak' that commences the opus, and in some style too; Old's inimitable and melancholic vocal delivery might not be to everyone's tastes (mine included...initially), but his vocals now embody the The Radio Sun sound just as much as Janevski's blistering guitar. The Pop Rock genre is still represented, with 'Tell Me What You Want', 'Hanging By A Thread' and 'Madness In The World' all displaying catchy commerciality.

But it's songs like 'Do You Remember Me', 'Walk Away' and my personal favourite 'Maybe' that highlight the bands progression into Melodic Rock adulthood. I must also mention, 'Dying Without Your Love' and 'One In A Million'; a couple of slow-tempo, lighters-in-the-air (or should that be mobile phones) songs that certainly warrant their inclusion.

Is the album heaven or heartbreak? Well, after numerous spins I'm happy to report it's certainly knocking vociferously on those Pearly Gates. A definite grower!

Dave Crompton

THE SUMMIT – 'HIGHER GROUND' *(Pride & Joy)* HARD ROCK

The Summit are quirky Rockers who mix seventies Hard Rock influences with strong Pop sensibilities, think a mash-up between Led Zeppelin and The Beatles, It's not actually as crazy as it sounds. The Swedish act features 220 Volt guitarist Mats Karlsson, Easy Action drummer Bjorn Hoglund and Marmalade Souls vocalist Michael Klemme.

Whilst I could see their debut album 'Higher Ground' appealing greatly to Retro Rockers who enjoy Fleetwood Mac and other strong Pop-edged Rock acts of the seventies, it just doesn't hit or excite me. It's a pleasant enough listen and is actually quite relaxing back ground music with its easy vocal harmonies and Pop melodies but ultimately it leaves no lasting impression for me.

I think it's the varied melting pot of influences and styles thrown into the song-writing that will intrigue and interest listeners. Sometimes there is some Robert Plant style vocals, Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix style guitar riffage, FM and Elton John style song structures and large dollops of quirky Beatles type melodies. It really is a mixed bag and they do blend it all up nicely.

If you know the musicians involved with TS you'll know their high calibre so it'll be no shock to you to hear a top notch level of musicianship throughout the album, some great guitar hooks and vocal lines. But as always it doesn't matter how talented you are if a song doesn't captivate a listener then ability becomes secondary. I do feel someone with an affinity to the seventies will have a very different opinion to me on this album, but beyond 'Only Human' I find the album quite forgettable.

All the musicians involved with The Summit aimed to create an album that echoed the seventies and they have definitely accomplished that in spades as it overflows with seventies Rock styles and influences. It does feel like an album they made for themselves and a way for them to pay homage to an influential musical template on their lives but that self-indulgence also makes me feel only fans who share that same love and affection for that era will actually enjoy these songs.

If Retro Pop Rock tickles your fancies then I whole heartedly recommend giving 'Higher Ground' a once over. It's not for everyone though and it may fail to impress causal Rock fans but I do feel if you dig it…you'll dig it hard!

Paul Woodward

TRIAXIS – 'ZERO HOUR' *(Rocksector)* HEAVY METAL

Hailing from the exotic country of…erm… Wales, Triaxis initially will stand out as they are a mixed group of two guys and three girls who make powerful, Melodic Heavy Metal. 'Zero Hour' is their third release, squeezed in between touring like mad bastards, and this could be the one that makes the public sit up and take notice.

Clocking in at over seventy minutes, there's a lot to take in. What is immediately apparent, though, is that Triaxis are a class act. Vocalist Krissie has a powerful voice that is melodic and aggressive in equal parts. When the music tones down a bit you feel like you could be listening to a Symphonic Metal album, yet when it's going hell bent for leather there's no doubt that you're listening to a woman who is all Metal. She's not up there with some of the European elite singers, but she certainly has a bloody good go and sounds terrific throughout.

The album opens with a short, angry guitar riff, which threatens a standard Euro Metal "we are warriors" type of thing, but then it turns instead into 'Liberty', full of melody and power with more than a little creativity. All but one of the songs are over five minutes, which gives them more time to breathe, and lets the band play with their fret-boards. It's like the more instant Within Temptation tracks married with an Iron Maiden-like appreciation of melody and song structure. In a word, it's refreshing. Worth noting is some excellent lead guitar throughout by Glyn, who knows how to be technical without being a bloody show off.

I've been confronted with two Female-Fronted Metal acts this issue, with the impressive Huntress being the other. Triaxis are the more melodic, a result of also being the best song-writers. This is a Metal band that the U.K. can be proud of, a powerhouse of Rock with some neat melodic sensibilities and scorching musical ability.

If you like your music to come with a cracking female voice at the top, then you really need to check Triaxis out. If you don't, then check them out anyway.

Alan Holloway

THE TIRITH – 'TALES FROM THE TOWER' *(Convergent)* PROGRESSIVE

Put simply, a band name and an album title that can only suggest one thing… and you wouldn't be far wrong. A trio whose origins were back in the seventies together with a set of songs from the same period which have been re-worked into a contemporary setting and the word "classic" springs to mind not to mention Prog. Some may recall them from the dim and distant past when along with other young pretenders seeking the Prog crown, they were known as Minas Tirith.

With 'Tales From The Tower', the songs of Richard Cory and Tim Cox who take on all musical duties along with drummer Carl Nightingale, have in some cases been rearranged and supplemented lyrically and indeed, it's quite prophetic when the opening lines of the album sing of "going back to a place I once knew"

For the record, and with some sighs of relief echoing around, this isn't (repeat, IS NOT) a concept album although they couldn't resist having a bit of a theme running through several of the songs. Title track 'The Tower', an alien tower on a distant planet and the one pictured on the cover, and 'Song Of All Ages' follow the theme of what comes into view in the lyric "the door drew back and so we saw" – a lone figure and witness for a lost alien race.

Elsewhere, 'Lost' and 'Pioneers Of The Outer Arm' follow a similar direction, the former an epic tale of lost love on a galactic scale which unfolds at the end of the album, the latter a lighter take on a group of hapless privateers bungling their way across the galaxy in a decrepit ship. Autobiographical? Maybe, but this trio present a much classier musical work than that of some rudderless Prog brigands.

Certainly the vocal sound is very retro and by the second song in – 'Gin Lil' – there's that late sixties The Beatles/The Kinks English quirky lyrical and musical feel about the song before it moves into something more pastoral and acoustic. There are similar hints throughout the album; the quirky set of guitar notes at the opening of 'Pioneers…', for example, which also transport you back to a place from the past, not to mention quests for maidens fair. The combination of acoustic and electric guitar also features strongly adding to the dynamics and the arrangements.

They say the album is the fulfilment of a dream and with the promise of new material in the pipeline that can't be a bad thing.

Mike Ainscoe

THE TROUSERS – 'MOTHER OF ILLUSION' *(Soulmachine)* ROCK

This has flare... The Trousers are Hungarian and glory in this easily derided moniker. Good job then that this fourth album zips along; they have developed a Hard, Classic Rock swagger over those albums and this one is the easiest to access of the lot; rough, Punky and with little waist…

This is sloppy in a glorious way, wandering around with an overflowing glass of Chivas Regal with the Rolling Stones constantly hanging around, firing off ringing riffs and leering suggestively. 'Buckley Funeral Home' is so scruffy it's flies are undone, Diamond Dogs pointing and laughing, an organ flowing into the corners, 'Hysterical Route' bumps and grinds, rolling on a Glammy strut and a Bluesy exploration of a solo, hot pants shimmering.

Zoltan Kovery has the grain-soaked growl of a Blues troubadour and Peter Locke keeps those riffs down and very dirty. And if this was all there was, that wouldn't be a problem at all; but by God, that's not all.

Some of this has a sweeping Soundtrack Of Our Lives vibe, albeit with scything guitars racing along, scraping walls and emerging into a clearing, blinking and listening carefully for a buried solo – this is 'Mother Of Illusion'. 'Sonic Desert' has a middle which sounds like a 1960's spy theme, enjoying rough sax and a hot organ.

This is a collection of great fun Rock tunes done with panache, élan and sheer bloody mindedness. Who wouldn't want that? Growing exponentially, they are becoming better and better. The Trousers, what a turn-up!

Steve Swift

THREE ELEMENTS – 'GENERATION Y' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Three Elements are a four-piece from Switzerland and 'Generation Y' is their debut studio album, although they did release a live unplugged album a couple of years ago. The band has been together for five years and it is blatantly obvious that they are huge fans of Dave Grohl and the Foo Fighters. There are several songs, 'Far Away' is a classic example, which may attract some form of lawsuit if Grohl was to hear some of these songs and wasn't in the best of moods at the time!

The album contains ten tracks and clocks in at around thirty-five minutes so you get lots of punchy, "in your face", let's jump up and down to and shake your fists to Melodic Rock with a Punk attitude. Other influences include Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Danko Jones and Green Day.

There are no standout tracks; however, all ten songs are full "in your face" with a decent production. Vocalist Marco Sudu Sulzener has a powerful voice which serves the Punky songs well. Drummer Daniel Schonl provides a very solid backbone and there are plenty of crunchy riffs and several tasty solos from Jonathan Suter.

'Complicated', 'Don't Do This' and 'Social Network' get both feet tapping with their infectious melodies. 'What's Up' starts off slowly with hints of Green Day and then becomes much more ferocious a la Foos and even includes some really Funky bass towards the end from Raphi Angst.

All in all if you want something to blow away the cobwebs for half an hour or so then 'Generation Y' will do a pretty decent job!

Az Chaudhry

VANDEN PLAS – 'CHRONICLES OF THE IMMORTALS: NETHERWORLD II' *(Frontiers)* PROGRESSIVE

One of but a mere handful of post Dream Theater Progressive Metal bands who could actually be said to have developed and refined a sound all their own, it's hard to believe that Kaiserslautern's favourite sons Vanden Plas have been treading the boards for the best part of thirty years now!

Steeped in all the best traditions of musical theatre (a calling that still occupies quite a lot of their time), their recorded output over the years has been sparing, yet each new release has proven to be nothing short of a precision engineered masterpiece. That "unique" VP sound first came into its own on sophomore outing 'The God Thing' back in 1997 (don't get me wrong, debut 'Colour Temple' was awesome as well, but it had a slightly more Traditional Melodic Metal sound), and ever since they've continued to hone and tweak it to the point of perfection and beyond.

Second and concluding instalment in their 'Chronicles Of The Immortals' tome, 'Netherworld II' sees them once again combine forces with author Wolfgang Hohlbein to conclude their epic musical interpretation of his bestselling literary series. The culmination of a partnership that began several years ago when VP vocalist Andy Kuntz helped turn Hohlbein's books into an instant stage hit ('Bloodnight'), This release picks up the story where last year's first part left off and concludes the heroes epic struggle for peace and enlightenment… I won't delve too deeply into the story itself as that's not really the remit here.

What is very much the remit however is the VP musical interpretation of the age old good vs evil struggle, a meandering sojourn which delights at every unexpected twist and turn. Incandescent melodies, soaring crescendos and thought provoking troughs, deft keyboard orchestration, spiralling guitars and haunting vocals… everything you'd expect really from the band and then some.

Kuntz has the ability to convey more emotion in one line than most bands can muster in their entire back catalogue, and with a band of finely honed players behind him, the brooding melodrama that unfolds takes on a mantle of near biblical proportions! Precious little point in singling out individual tracks as 'Netherworld II' is meant to be digested whole, but I will say the ebb and flow of the epic 'Blood Of Eden', the ethereal 'Circle Of The Devil' and slow burning opener 'In My Universe' will brighten up those fast approaching cold winter evenings no end!

Still in a class all their own, Vanden Plas continue to spellbind with another superb slab of Progressive heaven!

Dave Cockett

THRESHOLD – 'EUROPEAN JOURNEY' *(Nuclear Blast)* PROGRESSIVE

Still the U.K.'s best kept secret despite over twenty-five years in the business, the underrated Threshold certainly lost a lot of headway after the departure of their previous vocalist Andrew "Mac" McDermott on the verge of what should have been their breakthrough album; 2007's 'Dead Reckoning'.

Maybe too Prog for Hard Rockers and too Hard Rock for Progressive Metal aficionados, Threshold have proven their live credentials over the years with almost as many great live albums as studio releases, doing so again here with a great fifteen track double album that focusses heavily on their last two studio albums; 'March Of Progress' (2012) and 'For The Journey' (2014).

'…Progress' came after a five year drought since singer Damian Wilson started his third tenure with the band, but label Nuclear Blast have thankfully kept faith in a band so consistently masterminded by keyboard player Richard West and celebrated guitarist and producer Karl Groom.

Never ones to deviate too much from the studio versions, 'European Journey' is over a hundred minutes of their best work, played with an attention to the details of the original recordings. Long-time bass player Steve Anderson and irrepressible drummer Johanne James skilfully anchor the songs for Groom and second guitarist Pete Morton to riff over and West to embellish with some impressive keyboard work.

Whilst Wilson does a superb job on the nine excellent songs from the last brace of releases, and indeed the reintroduced 'Part Of The Chaos' from 1997's 'Extinct Instinct' – the first Threshold album Wilson sang on – the spectre of the sadly deceased "Mac" hangs over classics like 'Mission Profile', 'Slipstream', 'Long Way Home' and especially the wonderful 'Pilot In The Sky Of Dreams'. That isn't a slight against Wilson, Groom and West, they wrote those songs with their former singer in mind and no-one else will ever sound quite right.

Even so, Threshold are a pretty impressive live band for one who play relatively few shows every year, and are captured here in their element. You tend to forget just how good they still are; so with a raw and powerful production from Groom and a set-list that doesn't replicate previous live albums too much, 'European Journey' is an essential live document for fans of any era of this criminally under-supported unit.

Phil Ashcroft

TOADSTOOL – 'THE LADY ELECTRIC' *(Independent)* ROCK

Royal Blood, Kings Of Leon, The White Stripes... A circle I often struggle to square is why certain bands are able to visit an oft plundered well and draw out something which makes the mainstream "aficionados" froth about innovation and new boundaries. To be fair, all three of those named can point to a song apiece and proclaim "there's a riff" and we have to nod and agree.

In terms of sound, Toadstool have much in common with that trio of breakthrough bands (not so much KoL); a vintage buzz and hum hammered out with a certain modernism that shouts "retro", but not homage. Led Zeppelin are a main pulling point, Black Sabbath a mere suggestion as a few of the tracks impertinently bustle into your day. What wasn't expected is the jeepstering gong banging of T-Rex and the cleaner sounds that reel Toadstool away from simple dirty rifferola and suggest that with time this Forest Of Dean trio may well have something genuinely different (if familiar) to brag about.

As it is, there's promise by the recycled bag full, the 1970s entertained in a reverential manner but not to the extent that Toadstool aren't willing to at least flit with the idea of marking their territory with a more idiosyncratic scent. Bassist Alex Macaskill also handles the microphone and if there's one possible block on which to stumble, then it may well be his scattergun sneer that sits somewhere between Marc Bolan, Geddy Lee and something more Sunset Strip. However his four-string thrum blends perfectly with drummer Scott McParland's clatter and batter, giving 'Dive Dive Dive' and 'Something To Prove' the forceful judder required to knock your attention into gear. While guitarist Nick Ingram sets the mud flying in 'Pigzilla' and alarm bells ringing in 'Sector 42'; the latter a genuine RB-like potential man in the street botherer.

Toadstool and their 'The Lady Electric' debut could be huge but I'd suggest the acclaim is as likely to arrive from those who hang on the every word of the Jo Whileys and Jools Hollands of this world than the out and out Rock brigade. On that, only time will tell.

Steven Reid

TOM KILLNER – 'HARD ROAD' *(Cleopatra)* BLUES/SOUL

When you think of musicians steeped in the Blues, an image of a ragged, grey and road-worn individual starts to materialize. As with everything, there are exceptions to the rule and none better illustrated than with Tom Killner, a dye-in-the-wool Blues singer/guitarist who clocks in at the tender age of nineteen!

The authenticity and attention to detail with which he approaches music makes him sound more than twice his age. Tom Killner pulls no punches and deliberately makes music firmly planted in tradition. His vocals sound somewhere between the grit of Dusty Hill (ZZ Top) and Joe Cocker. His guitar statements seem to pay homage to another fraction of ZZT, Billy Gibbons himself.

Common topics of drinking ('Whisky Haze', 'Cocaine Blues') and life's hardships ('Taking Its Toll', 'Hard Road') are all well represented. Although '…Toll' is very reminiscent of Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Simple Man', the fact the homage comes across heartfelt is well received.

While the album is about as traditional as it gets stylistically, its Lo-Fi production and slow to mid-tempos throughout do not necessarily invoke repeated listens. Like the title, 'Hard Road' is nothing more than raw, unfiltered Blues Rock, yet lacks the unique qualities of those legendary masters.

Shortcomings aside, 'Hard Road' is a significant statement. Not only is it proof that Blues in all its iterations is alive and well and coupled with youth, there is no denying that another generation of musicians exist that will be keeping this genre of music alive and relevant.

Brent Rusche

TRIVIUM – 'SILENCE IN THE SNOW' *(Warner)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Dare we cover a band like Trivium in our magazine? What would the purists say about a band that purveys Metal with growling screamed vocals?

Trivium has always been a band that I have admired; technically gifted and a band that perhaps in tandem with Avenged Sevenfold have redefined Metal in the modern era. Yet the vocal roar has always been an off putting feature to ears brought up on hooks and melodic

choruses delivered by clean vocals.

Of course, if we go back to 2006 it can be noted that vocalist Matt Heafy did indeed change his vocal style on 'The Crusade', omitting the Metalcore style in favour of straight singing, albeit in a much maligned James Hetfield way. Fast forward to 2015 and Trivium – according to guitarist Corey Beaulieu – now have the skills, particularly vocally, to craft a Metal album that combines all the technicality of today's Modern genre with an appreciation of old-school Classic Metal. To that end, Trivium has surpassed themselves.

Heafy's singing is controlled, powerful and epic and when harnessed to Michael "Elvis" Baskette's production and Josh Wilbur's mix, songs like the title track are melodic yet still feature chunky riffs big enough to serve with gravy. Think prime time AS sprinkled with sizeable carnage from Europe's Power Metal elite and touches of Iron Maiden's dual guitar attack and that may whet your appetite.

From start to finish 'Silence In The Snow' does exactly what it sets out to achieve. From the frantic double kick bass drums of 'Breathe In The Flames', the twin guitar attack of 'The Thing That's Killing Me ' or 'Blind Leading The Blind', through to the Metallica-like 'Dead And Gone' and the Maiden harmony guitar parts of 'Pull Me From the Void', there's something here for any follower of Metal both Classic and Modern.

'Silence In the Snow' opens a new chapter in the history of Trivium; it's a brave move but I can't see that it will alienate diehard fans and it may just bring on board a few new ones. It's certainly an album that should pique the interest of those who enjoy top quality Modern Metal from a band that represents the future of the genre.

Mike Newdeck

UGLY KID JOE – 'UGLIER THAN THEY USED TA BE' *(Metalville)* — HARD ROCK

The early nineties single 'Everything About You' has been both a blessing and a curse for Ugly Kid Joe. Undoubtedly it got them on the map, and a double platinum album and EP is not to be sniffed at, however the song's enduring popularity and video has left the band with an image as "surfer brats" that's hard to shake.

However, anyone with a pair of ears can hear that UKJ has moved on. In fact, the band always released different types of material from very heavy and Rap to Funk Metal and soulful ballads; not just Pop Nu-Metal, although only the latter got real airplay. As such they have been unfairly typecast, victims of their own success. They don't belong just in one box and deserve a second look with fresh eyes. These guys can play and Whitfield Crane has a great voice, much too good to be used for simply shouting Rap style lyrics (listen to old track 'Slower Than Nowhere' for example).

A lot better than its predecessor, the brand new album shows their versatility and talent. It's a damn fine Rock album and stands up to scrutiny on its own merit with no need for the competent covers of songs like 'Ace Of Spades' which have been added at the end. No doubt the band have added a couple of covers for fun and because of their legacy of doing live covers by Black Sabbath; maybe they should have the confidence to just go with their own original material, as it's quality stuff.

Openers 'Hell Ain't Hard to Find' and 'Let the Record Play' are great songs, commercial but still heavy. If the band were the Foo Fighters they would no doubt get a lot of play. 'Bad Seed' is heavier, almost like Black Label Society, with blistering, soaring guitar and again shows that Crane can turn his voice to just about any style with good results.

'Mirror Of The Man' is a downturn in tempo and doesn't stand up quite so well, however we're soon back to the superb guitar riffs of 'She's Already Gone'. 'Nothing Ever Changes' is reflective, a beautiful, if sad ballad which fully justifies its place. 'My Old Man' is catchy and original with insistently rhythmic lyrics backed with fine guitar whilst 'Under The Bottom' is the final original song and is more like an Ozzy Osbourne/Zakk Wylde song (shredding-akimbo) than anything you would associate with these former Hollywood brats.

The band have grown up. Will they ever shed the old image short of a change of name? It's hard to know, but they have a shot at it if they keep making great material like this. Listen, you may be surprised!

Dawn Osborne

WAKEN EYES – 'EXODUS' *(Ulterium)* — PROGRESSIVE

Dream Theater inadvertently created a new sub-genre way back in 1989 with the release of their debut album 'When Dream And Day Unite' and took it to an altogether higher level three years later with the follow-up, 'Images And Words', an album which still sets the standard to this very day.

Since then there has been a steady stream of bands all striving to seize DT's crown with the likes of Symphony X, Vanden Plas and Pain Of Salvation all coming close. With the release of 'Exodus', Waken Eyes are now staking their claim to the throne.

While WE may be a new name to most, they do possess a line-up of some considerable pedigree with drummer Marco Minnemann forming a rather fearsome rhythm section with Symphony X's Mike Lepond. Henrik Bath of Darkwater adds the vocals while WE creator and multi-instrumentalist Tom Frelek shows off his talents on guitar and keyboards.

It comes as no surprise that WE have come up with something rather special with their debut release. From the opening instrumental 'Cognition' to the monstrous epic 'Exodus' that clocks in at almost twenty minutes, this is one master-class in how to deliver a Progressive Metal tour-de-force.

The production is big, expansive and packs a punch while giving the intricate instrumentation space to breathe and weave a multitude of moods and atmospheres. Frelek's guitar work excels. Sure he has the requisite dexterity and lays it on when needed but he also knows how to ease off and some of his melodies are breath-taking. 'Cornerstone Away' is a case in point; it is this ability to embrace the dynamics of the music that really adds to the album.

For Frelek to shine so brightly amongst the stellar cast in the band is testament to his musicianship and his name will undoubtedly become more widely known once 'Exodus' hits the streets. The songs themselves are just that, songs. The musicianship doesn't smother the melodies or become overbearing at the expense of the song structure. 'Deafening Thoughts' and 'Back To Life' feature sky-scraping melodies brought to life by the classy, powerful, melodic vocals of Bath.

Needless to say, Minnemann does plenty to show why he is one of the genres finest drummers and at times his performance is just jaw dropping and alongside Lepond there are few who can match them in full flow.

Whether Waken Eyes will remain a studio project or will develop into a full-blown touring band remains to be seen, but whatever happens in the future 'Exodus' may well be one of the best Progressive Metal albums in recent years.

Mick Burgess

VARIOUS ARTISTS – 'ELECTRIC GATHERING' *(Anchorage)* — INSTRUMENTAL

'Electric Gathering' is a showcase for instrumental guitar music which sees both undiscovered or unsigned talent as well as some established known names come together on one collection to highlight and support the future of guitar-based music. This compilation album gathers artists from all over the world including countries like U.S.A., Canada, U.K., Finland, Israel, Japan &Argentina.

World class and highly respected guitarists such as Jeff Kollman (Glenn Hughes, Asia Feat John Payne, Chad Smith's Bombastic Meatbats), Chris Poland (Megadeth, OHM) and Michael Hampton (Parliament Funkadelic) are joined by underrated guitarists such as internet favourite Jeff Fiorentino. John Herdt is backed by ex-Tommy Bolin collaborators Wally Z and David Givens and young international talent such as female Jazz virtuoso Yue's Bumping Jam, Yossi Sassi and Elmo Karjalainen.

The overall feel of the album is a little like the concept Prog albums of the seventies but without the concept. 'Ethereal' is like an "other worldly" soundtrack of a trip to Pluto followed by the heavier 'Pyramids On Mars', it's a little like a modern day Planet Suite. The atmospheric vibe continues with Sassi's 'Neo Quest' and 'Unintelligent Designs' (albeit this a little heavier) while 'Abby And Owen' is meandering and soothing.

'Alter Ego' ups the pace a little and would be a Bluesy accompaniment to a long open road trip. 'Club Metalfunkadelamack' is an Electro Rock rip up the frets whilst 'Deafen My Neighbour' is riffy and has the strongest hooks. 'Fearless' is reminiscent of Yngwie Malmsteen's Neo Classic beginnings and the oddly named 'Hip Hop Karma' is actually rather Funky.

My favourite track is Jam's 'Jungle Traffic Jam', it has a very 1970's Jazz Funk thing going on and stands alone. 'Patient Zero' is a pacy Rocker followed by another Jazzy number 'Rude Bayou'. 'Shedding Skin' is slightly schizophrenic, starting with a slightly South American acoustic, it morphs suddenly into something altogether heavier. 'War Machine' bottoms out the album with some heavy Funk vibes.

Instrumental albums need to have a very strong concept and for this it needs a musician who can look at the album as a whole and rein it in when needed. Otherwise it has a tendency to be rather self-indulgent.

'Electric Gathering' suffers from a lack of direction and whilst there is no doubt about the musicianship, the songs get rather overwhelmed by the playing. One for fans of the contributors as a showcase of their skills but it doesn't really gel into a memorable album.

Helen Bradley Owers

VARIOUS ARTISTS – 'W.A. MOZART: REINCARNATED' *(Lion)* — INSTRUMENTAL

Lion Music records have put together this guitar tribute to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and as you can imagine the notes are aplenty. In a similar way to how Ritchie Blackmore took on Beethoven (and won on all accounts), the works of Mozart are formidably tackled.

Luckily for Lion, they have some accomplished guitarists in their stable; so for example the rapid 'Allegro Con Brio (Symphony No 25)' works well and Patrik Carlsson shines with a virtuoso display of Legato and some Modern Metal tricks.

Lars Eric Mattsson (owner of Lion) takes on 'The Magic Flute' and a hummable piece it certainly is. Other bands/musicians involved are Mistheria, Lord Of Mushrooms, Robert Rodrigo and a whole lot more.

So if you are interested in how a Metalized Mozart sounds, look no further.

Rob McKenzie

VASA – 'COLOURS' *(Independent)* — INSTRUMENTAL

A primary goal of instrumental music is to elicit visceral emotion in the absence of melodic verse. However, when that connection fails, the listener is left unfulfilled. Vasa, the Glasgow-based quartet attempt to communicate their brand of music sans vocals with their debut entitled 'Colours'. Vasa is an interesting amalgamation of styles which focus on whimsical melodies which dance and spin amongst heavy grooves and bombastic drumming.

Fusing the delay-heavy approach from The Edge (U2), the thick 'Wall Of Sound' leanings of Devin Townsend and the hypnotizing melodic figures from the Shoegaze movement (think My Bloody Valentine) of the early nineties makes for one enticing formula.

While 'Colours' possesses texture in spades and are capable of constructing soundscapes that are equal parts lush and melodic (none better represented than on the single 'Fat Ronaldo'), their compositions ultimately fail to convey a cogent statement.

'Colours' features a track-list containing prominent melody, a substantial rhythmic backbone and interesting sonics. However, it lacks the compositional development that would more accurately represent the album's title.

'Ergonomic Keyboard' is one such track that bucks the trend where a repetitive melodic figure atop an odd time rhythmic pattern combines to create an interesting polyrhythm. However, the moment is short-lived and the band takes the song into more predictable concerted writing where all parts follow a basic theme.

As it stands with 'Colours', Vasa's approach to Alternative/Experimental Rock would best be executed with the addition of a vocalist. Although the music is enjoyable enough, it lacks the interest to capture a listener's full attention.

If Vasa continues with its current line-up, they will need to deliver a much more diverse and challenging album to suit the needs of a growing and more discerning public.

Brent Rusche

VERMILLION ROAD – 'PALACES' *(Independent)* — MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

'Palaces' is the debut album from Vermillion Road. The Denver four-piece bring a collection of solid, well-produced tracks, mixing heavy guitar sounds with more Alternative melodic vocals for a fresh-faced Alternative Rock album.

At first the tone of the vocals strike you as unfitting but give Will Robison a chance and he'll show you why his soaring, clear-cut voice works on the emotional choruses in 'Tread On Me' and 'These Lies'. On the ballad 'Palaces' he is especially commanding.

The pace is generally quite laid-back, even on the heavier tracks. The songs are a little safe, especially the in the first half, and you can be forgiven for thinking they sound very similar. The bridges mix softer passages well amidst the heavy rhythm section. It's good to hear Hunter Heurich switching up the guitar sound for the solo on 'Palaces'; it plays with the pace too, which can sometimes feel a bit dragging in the first half of the album.

The second half of the album is where VR hit their stride. 'No Crying Allowed' has more edge and drive, dancing out of the lines that it sometimes feels the tight production has drawn around the album's sound. It can, in places, sound a bit too clean and almost immature in its tone. But the racy vocal licks and bass fills add frills in all the right places to create one of the more exciting tracks on the album.

'N.H.B.' mixes a Grungy, strutting verse with a brighter chorus and plenty of major notes slung in there. 'All The Same' keeps throwing the rhythmic punches and features a couple of fantastic melodic hooks too. 'Make My Day' bounces from an infectious, building verse to a chorus thumping with backing vocals that you want to jump around to.

It's an album that, unusually, is far better in the second half. There's a good deal of power but also a feeling of being a very youthful Rock album. What Vermillion Road does best is faultlessly deliver heavy energy without losing the reflection and emotion in their lyrics.

Sophie Brownlee

W. ANGEL'S CONQUEST – 'TASTE OF LIFE' *(Code 7)* — POWER METAL

Conquest (as they were previously known) have been around since 1996 and on the strength of this record can lay claim to being the Ukraine's best Power Metal band (although I'm not sure how stiff the competition is). This is their fifth album but it shows a definite development in their sound. This is partly down to new lead singer Konstantin "Laars" Naumenko who takes over the singing duties; he has that soaring Michael Kiske type approach which suits the music well.

This is well executed and thought out Metal. Nicholas W. Angel's guitar is powerful and he unleashes varied, Neo-Classical solos throughout but the album's strength is not that it merely serves as vehicle for his fret-board wizardry but rather it's all about the songs and he's happy to share air time with the keyboards and it's these that bring a Progressive and Melodic edge to the band's sound.

The music has an unmistakably European flavour and if you didn't know better you'd swear the sound and melodies on 'Revolution' and 'Sunrise' were from a Scandinavian band. Despite the fact the keyboard and guitar intros can sound similar over a whole record and the frantic drumming would benefit from more light and shade (the double bass drum loses its power when played constantly), the songs have enough variety to make this a success as a cohesive, listenable album.

'Fellowship' with its Symphonic undertones has a good angular riff, an enthralling rapid fire solo and a heroic chorus. The aforementioned 'Sunrise' is closer to The Poodles than Power Metal whereas 'Martian Gods' is blunter and heavier. They even give us a ballad in the form of 'Blooming Day' which is a highlight. It starts from a vocal, backed by only drums and bass before the guitar joins in to build weight and it has a big, hooky chorus that many a Melodic Rock band would be proud of, all decorated with a sprinkling of keyboards.

Okay, a song like the title track might not raise the heart beat much but they finish the album strongly with 'The Road', showing there's much more to this band than just heads-down Metal (which they can do too). It begins with an acoustic intro borrowed from the Coverdale Page album before it goes into a stirring Power Metal anthem.

There's some terrific guitar and keyboard playing, at times, on songs that are multi-dimensional. Some of those choral hooks need more work if they are to be successfully hot branded into your memory but if you like your Euro Power Metal then you'd do well to check these Ukrainians out, offering the same flair as many bands with a much higher profile.

Duncan Jamieson

WORHOL – 'THE AWAKENING' *(Independent)* — SYMPHONIC METAL

It's certainly an unusual thing to find a father and daughter pairing in Rock music, but that's exactly what we get here as Larry and Ashley Worhol have delivered a competent debut that will be of interest to any who like their Rock music to be ethereal and Operatic in tone.

There are immediate comparisons with Evanescence as opener 'Voices From Above' kicks off, mainly because Ashley Worhol has a very similar voice to that of Amy Lee. Further than that, the bands do not warrant comparison too much, as Warhol don't have a male vocalist nor do they ever get very exciting.

In fact, the only track that shows any real vibrancy is the instrumental 'Rage And Revenge', where Larry Worhol gets to let rip a bit in a decent piece of music. Elsewhere the songs are all mid-paced, quite relaxing and often devoid of much real charm.

They tend to be piano-led, with strings wafting in when needed to back up the guitar, and all are quite interchangeable with one another. Ashley Worhol may have what she calls "angelic" vocals, but the song-writing never gives her a chance to show what she can really do.

Ultimately, whilst Warhol initially impress with the vocals and dreamlike quality of the songs, after a few listens it's all rather samey and a bit boring. There's a seed of a great band here, but Warhol and its members need to allow it to grow.

WUCAN – 'SOW THE WIND' *(Napalm)* — MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Alan Holloway

Wucan are from Dresden, Germany and they are the latest of the Female-Fronted Stoner bands to play the circuit. What sets them apart is not the fact they have a female singer, but a female singer that plays flute. Despite only six songs on the release, there are a mass of mystical ideas on offer.

'Father Storm' is a frantic Rocker, with some short bursts of flute thrown in for good measure. The influence of Uriah Heep and early Black Sabbath are all over the guitar chord progressions, while singer Francis Tobolsky has a moody attitude to her voice which suits the music perfectly. Seventies band Coven is the influence I heard in 'Owl Eyes', the song is a mixture of hard pounding grooves mixed in with some ruthless banshee vocals.

If Jethro Tull had been dabbling in the dark arts, I imagine they would have come up with 'Looking In The Past'. The guitar thrusts in and out of the song, leaving a trial of Funk-influenced grooves, it pulls in a great many directions, but always seems to arrive back at its starting point effortlessly.

The bizarrely titled 'Face In The Kraut' is by far the most accessible song on this release. Tobolsky's vocal is emotional and cuts through a mass of fuzz tone guitar work to leave a shining gem of a song.

'King Korea' is incredibly close to some of Jex Thoth's work; whilst dark and mysterious during the beginning, the song then takes a u-turn into Garage Rock territory which kind of loses the vision.

'Wandersmann' clocks in at around sixteen minutes and is sung in the bands native tongue, it is an ambitious piece that really doesn't have enough strong musical ideas to warrant its length though.

Wucan pack a wealth of ideas into these six songs, and I imagine they will be a band that will stand out from the competition in the future.

Ray Paul

RE-ISSUES

BLITZKRIEG – 'A TIME OF CHANGES: 30th ANNIVERSARY EDITION' *(Metal Nation)* — HEAVY METAL

It is one of the mysteries of the New Wave Of British Heavy Metal era that Blitzkrieg fell into near obscurity so quickly. So quickly, in fact, that the original line-up didn't make it out of 1981, and the planned debut album 'A Time of Changes' wasn't recorded and released until 1985.

It seems just as astonishing (given the early history) that I'm now sitting listening to a '30th Anniversary Edition' of said album. It's not a standard re-issue, though. Due to "catalogue sale and resale" issues, the original album is, it seems, "lost in the vaults of corporate hell and may never see the light of day again". Consequently '…Changes' has been completely re-recorded by the current Blitzkrieg line-up, which is driven by irrepressible vocalist Brian Ross, the band's only original member.

Pleasingly, the re-recording has not violated or removed any of the NWOBHM energy and vibe that is the charm of Blitzkrieg's earlier material. 'Ragnarok' brings a smile to one's face with it sub-classical drama and musical earnestness (not quite 'Lick My Love Pump', but not a million miles away). 'Inferno' raises the stakes and even before we reach 'Blitzkrieg' itself, the sounds and style that so influenced Metallica are evident.

There is much here to enjoy. 'Armageddon' and 'Take A Look Around', for example, capture much of the spirit of the age and really take one back. 'Pull The Trigger' with its Iron Maiden-esque riff and dual guitars features guest performances from Russ Tippins and Steve Ramsay of Satan (Ross's other band). 'A Time Of Changes' itself, with its heavy riff, its Beatitude-referencing spoken introduction, and its well-structured pace changes, show clearly what might have been had the band capitalised on the momentum they'd started to build back in 1981.

Two bonus tracks also feature – 'Too Wild To Tame', which was originally recorded as the band's second single (backed by two other tracks that appear here, 'Vikings' and 'Hell To Pay') but shelved and left off the album for time reasons; and 'Jealous Love', which was written back in the day but has never before been released (and, to be honest, still sounds a bit like a demo).

With new artwork and a twelve page lyric booklet featuring photos of the band then and now and new sleeve notes from Ross himself, this is an excellent re-release. If I'm being fussy, I might just prefer the original version of 'Blitzkrieg', but as an old Metalhead who's just been taken back in time and is pretending he's too cool for school, you'd expect me to say something like that, wouldn't you?

Michael Anthony

FATES WARNING – 'A PLEASANT SHADE OF GRAY (DELUXE EDITION)' *(Metal Blade)* — PROGRESSIVE

Once the third column of a holy triumvirate of 1980's bands who changed the face of Progressive Metal forever (the others being Dream Theater and Queensryche), Fates Warning have in many respects become its forgotten sons. From relatively mediocre beginnings in Connecticut where they were little more than second rate Iron Maiden wannabes, they gradually morphed into one of the most sophisticated Metal acts of the age, a string of albums such as 'Perfect Symmetry', 'Parallels' and 'Inside Out' setting an enviable standard that all who came afterwards would have to follow.

For a while it looked as if they'd attain the same kind of lasting success as DT, but a string of disappointing releases (a concept Queensryche fans will be all too painfully familiar with) and, in the words of vocalist Ray Alder, a "lackadaisical attitude towards recording and touring" inevitably took its toll. Hate to say it, but from my perspective the wheels came off big time for the band back in 1997 with the release of 'A Pleasant Shade Of Gray', the subject of this rather impressively packaged (if somewhat puzzling) "Deluxe" re-issue.

Containing just one song divided into twelve parts – this new 3CD/DVD version has the original album, a live version from 1998's European tour (the fact that the Scorpions 'In Trance' is by far the most impressive song on offer ought to tell you something) and early concept demos along with two full shows on the DVD portion – '…Gray' isn't for the faint hearted; it wasn't an easy listen back then and it remains so to this day (believe me, I've tried on and off over the years!).

Darker, more reflective and introspective than anything they'd released up to that point, 'A Pleasant Shade Of Gray' is in many respects the sound of a band disappearing up its own arse! Okay, a tad harsh perhaps – there are after all some interesting passages scattered about here and there if you delve hard enough ('Parts V', 'Part VII' and 'Part VIII' have their moments) but if you're on a sugar high going in you'll almost certainly need valium coming out the other end.

Lacking hooks, emotion, warmth or indeed character for the most part, this is "art for art's sake", a frustratingly misguided attempt to fuse Progressive, Post-Industrial and Traditional Rock influences to please themselves at the expense of virtually anyone else who'd listen to it post recording.

Great package for sure, but why they chose the dullest Fates Warning album this side of the damn near unlistenable 'Disconnected' is beyond me ... sorry, I'll pass.

Dave Cockett

MR. POLLACK – 'BLACK HAWK' *(Metal Mind)* HARD ROCK

Many bands who used to proclaim themselves as "brothers" are now gone, divided over the so-called "artistic differences" (or financial, perhaps). With this in mind, does it get any easier if you play in a band alongside your own sibling – or is it just the other way around? In this case, it is something the acclaimed Polish musicians Jacek and Grzegorz Polak have handled pretty well for the last quarter of the century with their latest album – entitled 'Black Hawk' – being re-issued now by Metal Mind.

Music-wise, 'Black Hawk' harks back to early Mr. Pollack recordings (1995's 'Manhattan One' for instance) rather than their Neo Classic endeavours that earned Jacek Polak the title of the "Paganini Of The Guitar". From the very first track 'Black Hawk Mielec Rock" onwards, it's mostly solid, well-crafted Melodic Hard Rock songs. Occasionally their sound gets seasoned with a tint of juicy Funk-ish flavour ('Stand Up And Run', 'Socrates', 'I Know You') that would have made Glenn Hughes proud (or, perhaps, uneasy about the competition).

A moment of slowdown is a rarity amongst the mid and up-tempos on the album – a pity perhaps especially with the neat, semi-acoustic ballad 'The Wheel Of Life' and its wonderfully wailing guitar solo. And although the album is not about the showcase of the instrumental skills of the Polak brothers as much as it is about the songs and the substance, there's plenty of moments on it that every guitar lover will find breath-taking (including 'Gold And Money' featuring a guest appearance by one of the best Polish guitarists Grzegorz Skawinski).

If you're in a mood for a flirtation with more modern and slightly more Metal-esque sound aesthetics, try 'Power And The Glory'. A bit of linguistic curio approaches with the last five bonuses, Polish versions of previously included songs.

A mature, classy and refined Melodic Rock album, 'Black Hawk' is another worthy addition to Mr. Pollack's catalogue. Although the temptation for a showcase of instrumental virtuosity might have been there, the Polak brothers resisted, delivering a handful of catchy, but musically varied tracks and interesting arrangements instead.

It's an album coming from a country which might not have been huge on Melodic Hard Rock but certainly produced a few notable acts associated with this genre.

Alexandra Mrozowska

SAGA – 'THE BEGINNERS GUIDE TO THROWING SHAPES', 'THE SECURITY OF ILLUSION' *(earMUSIC)* PROGRESSIVE

Picking up the classic Canadian Pompsters in 2012 for the '20/20' album, the earMUSIC label have set about re-mastering the Saga catalogue, or at least the section of it from 1989 onwards when they left the major labels.

Keyboard player Jim Gilmour and drummer Steve Negus had left the band in 1986, so the remaining trio of Michael Sadler (vocals/keys), Jim Crichton (bass/keys) and Ian Crichton (guitar/synthaxe) had recorded their most commercial album to date in 'Wildest Dreams' for Atlantic. The record wasn't too successful so they were dropped, but the trio, with the help of top session drummer Curt Cress, forged ahead and released 'The Beginners Guide To Throwing Shapes' in 1989.

With the same hi-tech AOR sound as '...Dreams' mixed with the Progressiveness of their early records, 'Beginners...' was an artistic success at least, featuring killer guitars from Ian Crichton, Sadler's unique vocals and all kinds of synth stuff going on; it was a pretty lively album throughout. The sound of the album was phenomenal and the arrangements on songs like 'How Do I Look', 'Shape', 'Waiting In The Wings' and 'Giant' were truly original and action-packed; to this day it's my favourite in a career of awesome albums. The re-mastering brings out the intricacies even further, giving a more powerful bottom end and greater separation of the instruments.

The band disappeared for a while before reuniting with Gilmour and Negus in 1992 for a European tour and releasing 'The Security Of Illusion' the following year. It was another winner that reverted to a more organic sound without muting the big guitar tone of the last album. Rockers like 'Mind Over Matter', 'Once Is Never Enough', 'Days Like These' and 'No Man's Land' share space with beautiful ballads like 'Alone Again Tonight' and the acoustic title track.

Again it sounds even better in its re-mastered form and this pair of albums would be a good place to start for anyone wanting to investigate the band. I only have promo discs so I can't vouch for the promised in depth sleeve essays and unpublished photos, but both albums have two bonus tracks each that I find pointless as they're live and taken from a show in Hamburg this April past, bearing no relation to the album they've been added to.

Decent enough recordings that would have made a better full album, and still might, the first disc has 'Wind Him Up' from 'World's Apart' and 'The Flyer' from 'Heads Or Tails', whilst the second has 'Scratching The Surface' and the debut's 'Ice Nice'.

However, top marks for the re-mastering and making these classics available again.

Phil Ashcroft

STREET TALK – 'RESTORATION', 'TRANSITION', 'V' *(MelodicRock)* MELODIC ROCK

After first hearing the magnificent Street Talk back in 1997 with the simply fantastic 'Collaboration' I was sold. Fredrik Bergh, then an unknown guitarist (to me) had managed to come up with an album of the most absolutely fantastic Traditional AOR that simply blew me away. Fast forward to the year 2000 and 'Restoration' makes an appearance, this time featuring none other than Goran Edman on vocals, on a set of top drawer West Coast/AOR songs. 'Give Me A Reason' and 'Hare And Hounds' being particularly stand outs in the up-tempo department whilst the almost late night, lounge lizard, laid back 'My Heart Beats For You' is nothing short of stunning. The song never fails to deliver that goose-bumps moment particularly Bergh's short but incredibly sublime solo. Sadly on the re-issue version, there are a lot of original demos, two featuring Kimmo Blom, and one featuring Peter Bromann (Amaze Me – remember them?), but pick of the bunch has to be the Japanese bonus track which is an instrumental and showcases just how good a guitarist Bergh actually is.

By the time 'Transition appeared, Edman and Bergh were a bona fide partnership, Edman's succulent tones perfectly suited to whatever Bergh presented him with, whether it was powerful up-tempo Rock or heart felt balladry, it was simply meant to be. The oddly titled 'Ye Gods And Little Fishes' is possibly the pick of the bunch with Bergh wring emotion out of his guitar like Yngwie Malmsteen only wished he could and Edman adding the spice on top. Funnily enough , the also strangely titled 'Energizer Bunny' remains one of the most fun tracks the band has done, but it's the more serious fare such as the rather amazing 'If Anybody Breaks Your Heart' that really hammers it home that ST were not just also rans but in fact leading the pack. The added extra of the original Japanese bonus track sees the band establishing its tradition of an instrumental track, albeit it a very good one. Of the remaining bonus tracks, what we have is the original writers demos featuring Bergh on vocals, but what is interesting is the comparison you can make when Edman comes on board. It really is night and day, and shows the value of having a world class singer on board. Once again there is not a duff track in sight in the original album.

The last of the Street Talk albums, 'V', dropped in 2006, and maintains the extremely high standard of the previous albums. 'Don't Believe' treads a slightly heavier path without losing the bands roots, 'If I Could' continues in the same vein, the band obviously enjoying letting rip a little bit more than on past albums. However it is imperative to say, despite the sound being a little tougher than before, every nuance of the great Traditional AOR/West Coast traits are retained. 'Just A little Appetizer' and 'Oh Maddy' are further stand out tracks, '...Maddy' in particular possibly the stand out track of the whole album. Of the re-issue bonus tracks four are instrumental versions of songs already on the album, but it's the addition of the two 'Destination' compilation tracks in the shape of 'Astray' and 'Made For Paradise' that really gives this album the slightest edge over the others. Both tracks are absolute monsters and how they never made an album in their own right is beyond me.

All in all there is not a lot contained in these re-issues unless you are an absolute diehard fan, but if for any reason you missed these first time around, here is an opportunity to drool uncontrollably over a trio of albums that not only stand head and shoulders above much of the opposition, but at times actually defines classy West Coast/AOR. If you want to hear what pure sounds like, without the studio wizardry so common in so many of today's releases, then get hold of these and be prepared to be dragged back in time when albums like these were few and far between, but worth every second waiting for.

Kieran Dargan

WHISKEY MYERS – 'FIREWATER' *(Spinefarm)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK

It's been barely six months since I reviewed Southern Rock upstarts Whiskey Myers third album 'Early Morning Shakes' (issue #67 to be precise), their first to get an official U.K. release, so I'm certainly appreciative that Spinefarm have had the good sense to give the same treatment to the Texans second album 'Firewater' – however it's been padded out with three cuts lifted from their debut effort 'Road Of Life' (namely 'Lonely East TX Nights', 'Summer 2005' and the epic 'American Outlaws'), so it's unlikely said debut will also be afforded the same luxury.

While '...Shakes' imbued the traditional Southern sound with a healthy dose of Led Zeppelin stomp, 'Firewater' sticks mainly to the Southern and Country blueprint and more than doffs a Stetson to classic Lynyrd Skynyrd. They're certainly not afraid to admit it either, as the stomping opener 'Bar, Guitar And A Honky Tonk Crowd' name checks Skynyrd's creation Curtis Loew and 'Ballad Of A Southern Man' includes the lyric "I know all the words to 'Simple Man'" – even vocalist Cody Cannon's phrasing reeks of Johnny Van Zant. 'Guitar Picker', the Blues-tinged 'Calm Before The Storm' and 'Turn It Up' certainly wouldn't have sounded out of place on any of the early LS albums.

However, it's definitely not just a case of LS plagiarism here, as there is a definite Country slant to a fair few numbers too, the harmonica-riddled 'Broken Window Serenade' is very Eagles circa 'Desperado', the ballad 'Virginia' is edged with beautiful pedal-steel guitar while 'Anna Marie' is a lively acoustic-based ditty.

On the other hand, 'Different Mold' is pure Muddy Waters Blues and 'Turn It Up' is a Blues Rock stomper, while the simply stunning 'Strange Dreams' features some of that Led Zep groove with a little of Fleetwood Mac's 'Oh Well' and a touch of Psychedelia, though mid-way the change in tempo takes the song in a completely different Rock 'N' Roll direction, complete with a stunning guitar-laden climax.

The original 'Firewater' album closes with the eight-minute 'Song For You', a hauntingly melancholic, meandering ballad featuring just one gentle acoustic guitar and an emotional Cannon vocal, while being riddled with a production technique to make it sound like a crackly old vinyl record; this is seemingly an odd decision initially but the more you listen to it the more you appreciate how it works.

Though I enjoyed '...Shakes', it didn't put Whiskey Myers up there with my Southern must-haves in the way that Blackberry Smoke have been elevated in the past year, but 'Firewater' has given me a whole new appreciation of this band – I now can't wait for album number four to arrive.

Ant Heeks

ZEPHYR – 'GOING BACK TO COLORADO'/'SUNSET RIDE' *(BGO)* ROCK

Zephyr were a group formed in 1969, billed as a Blues/Jazz Rock band. Featuring Candy Givens on vocals, with her husband David on bass, the group was completed with Robbie Chamberlain on guitar and John Faris on keyboards. Their most famous member however was a gifted guitar player by the name of Tommy Bolin, who would eventually wind up replacing Ritchie Blackmore in Deep Purple and handling guitar duties for their 'Come Taste The Band' album and tour prior to his tragic, untimely death.

While Bolin's presence is likely the primary reason for these re-issues, his stint in Zephyr had a profound effect on him, as the sleeve-notes see bass player David Givens explain while Bolin was a natural mimic, able to replicate virtually anything he heard, he was introduced to a great deal of Rock such as Steppenwolf by keyboardist Faris, which helped shape his own style and sound.

The material on 1971's 'Going Back To Colorado' spans a West Coast feel, as heard on the title track, to 'Miss Libertine' which clearly channels some of Led Zeppelin's more melodic tones. Produced by Eddie Kramer, who went on to put together a staggering CV which included work for Zeppelin themselves, Jimi Hendrix, David

Bowie, KISS and The Kinks to name a few, the album is very much of its time. There's some weird experimentation with 'Night Fades Softly' and a rambling collection of styles and ideas woven into the material. The album is mellower than their debut and the highlights come mostly from Bolin's flashes of brilliance, rather than the actual songs themselves.

The second disk here, 'Sunset Ride', was originally released in 1972, but unfortunately does not feature Bolin. He had quit the band in order to form his own act Energy, and was replaced by Jock Bartley. There was less sonic experimentation here, but similarly the guitar work, while perfectly competent, is not as dazzling as when Bolin delivered it. Candy Givens is the primary star of the show here, skillfully handling the wide variety of musical styles the album explores, but much like the previous Zephyr albums, it comes across more as a sprawling collection of random ideas. 'I Am Not Surprised' is a Blues, harmonica-led stomper, 'Time Lonesome' is mellow Country, 'Moving Too Fast' opens with a Jazzy interlude and 'Chasing Clouds' is an epic ballad.

The re-mastering is top notch and the sleeve-notes are interesting, particularly when they claim Zephyr continue to enjoy a cult following and boldly state when they were at their best, they were as good as the Jeff Beck Group, Purple or Zeppelin. Personally, I think that is hilarious, as I believe Bolin fanatics are the only ones likely to have any real interest in this release. The fact that he only appears on one of the two albums is a shame, and in my opinion I heard nothing on these records which should suggest Zephyr should be remembered as anything other than "that band Tommy Bolin was in".

James Gaden

MULTIMEDIA

AEROSMITH – 'ROCKS DONINGTON 2014' *(Universal/Eagle)* ROCK

The Boston Rockers are living legends and this DVD catches their performance at the Download Festival 2014, beginning with some backstage footage. While one can see every line on the member's faces, we also witness five men giving everything they've got. A band presenting themselves as unified force – even after forty-six years!

Opening with 'Train Kept A Rollin", the band really seem to enjoy playing. 'Eat The Rich', 'Love In An Elevator' and an unbelievable rendition of 'Cryin" leave no expectations unsatisfied. Boasting a massive sound (apart from a slightly weak mix of the drums; poor Kramer!) and perfectly sharp images, the entire mood and atmosphere of the gigantic open air show is presented most impressively. There's nothing to really criticise about the editing.

The set-list is a perfect cross-section of almost half a century in the career of Aerosmith. The absolutely incredible version of 'Janie's Got A Gun' left me with nothing but awe. Tyler, looking a little bit like Captain Jack Sparrow (the glow-paint on his face that will appear on stage later doesn't quite oust this impression), is like a human fireworks display with perfect control over his vocal cords, his voice doesn't seem to be ageing. This was be proven again during 'Home Tonight', where it's just him and his piano and also during the legendary 'Dream On'. Guitar God Joe Perry shows massive enthusiasm for his instrument of choice. As if it was the most natural thing to do, he delivers some of the most distinctive guitar solos and riffs of the past forty plus years and demonstrates why a lot of kids started to play guitar. His solo performance during 'Freedom Fighter', where he also handles lead vocals, is another beautifully captured moment. Drum-animal Joey Kramer doesn't seem to ever get tired and shows massive reserves of energy and skill. Tom Hamilton, the man with the most honourable and dignified aura I've ever seen, gets his moment of amazing grace during the intro of 'Sweet Emotion' and Brad Whitford, Aerosmith's "most effective secret musical weapon" (as stated in the booklet) comes along as the band's haven of tranquility.

The DVD is – just like the closing 'Mama Kin'– nothing but fireworks for all the senses. Together with a wonderful booklet with some beautiful photographs and great words by David Wild, the need for bonus material is superfluous.

What you get with this DVD is more than just a concert. It's the ultimate proof that Rock music is more alive than ever and that documents that even after almost half a century, a band can still be on the peak of their power. A cast-iron must-have for all fans of Aerosmith!

Julia Braun

BLACK STONE CHERRY – 'THANK YOU: LIVIN' LIVE' *(Eagle)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

'Thank You: Livin' Live' is Black Stone Cherry's debut live DVD. The performance featured was shot on the 'Magic Mountain' tour, exactly one year prior to the disc's scheduled release, at the band's sold-out Birmingham LG Arena show on 30th October 2014 which was the first time they had headlined an U.K. arena tour. I remember seeing them for the first time back in early 2007 (supporting Hinder) at some of the country's smaller venues and was more than impressed then.

The ninety-five minute show will be a great reminder to anyone that was there and should keep longstanding fans happy until the next studio album, due in Spring 2016. The set-list is well balanced and all four studio albums to date are represented. I was very dismissive about the '… Mountain' album when it was released last year and thought many of the songs were lacklustre and lacking decent hooks, they take on a new lease of life when performed live and benefit from slight adjustments to the arrangements that allow the hooks to impact more.

BSC have an "in your face" energy and the big stage is utilised to its fullest. Rhythm and occasional lead guitarist Ben Wells never stops and watching him alone is tiring just from the comfort of the armchair. The Jon Lawhon (bass)/John Fred Young (drums) rhythm section is rock solid and the thunderous bedrock to the music is served well by the big sound. The drum solo was a bit of a time filler but some people still enjoy that sort of thing. Front-man Chris Robertson rarely strays from centre stage, content to act as the anchor with his soulful vocals and unflashy guitar solos.

Thankfully the camera work is not too frenetic and the edit is just what you want from a show that shies away from theatrics to concentrate on the music. Some of the backing vocals are lost in the mix but with eight thousand extra voices to come to the rescue (and they get plenty of opportunities to join in) that is a minor quibble. The poignancy of 'Things My Father Said' is diminished by the extended crowd participation, despite that always being a great thing to see. It is one of my favourite BSC tracks and Robertson's vocals always move me so I would have preferred the sing-along to have taken place for something different.

It is pointless giving a full set-list as those familiar with the Kentucky quartet will know it anyway. The video I was sent was not a full DVD so I cannot comment on how well the sound will come across through a proper system. I know that 'Thank You: Livin' Live' will be available as a DVD, Blu-ray or DVD/CD package so there are plenty of options.

In short it's a Classic Rock show. No unnecessary gimmicks or effects, just vocals, two guitars, bass and drums. I managed to watch it four times in four days and even 'Game Of Thrones' has had to take a backseat for a little while.

Dave Bott

EMERSON LAKE AND PALMER – 'WELCOME BACK' *(Weinerworld)* PROGRESSIVE

This DVD is described as the definitive musical biography of Emerson Lake And Palmer, something this is most certainly not! Most of what is on offer here was filmed up to 1992 I believe, and this release originally appeared way back then, so it's a little out of date you could say. It is basically a cobbled together collection of archive interviews and performances from the bands career.

Admittedly some of Greg Lake's stories of on-stage disasters and Keith Emerson's and Carl Palmer's memories of the bands early days make for interesting viewing. It is probably the sort of DVD that a casual fan could enjoy, though diehards will find the lack of in-depth history disappointing, the complete omission of anything to do with the Emerson Lake and Powell period being a prime example!

The songs on offer vary greatly, new material like 'Paper Blood' filmed live on Lake Geneva is quite impressive. 'Honky Tonk Train Blues' is a chilling reminder of everything that went wrong with Progressive Rock in the seventies and is best fast-forwarded. The current album at the time 'Black Moon' is well represented, including videos and interviews with the band in the studio talking about the release.

It's a nostalgic moment when the late Alan (Fluff) Freeman introduces the band on stage at the Albert Hall in 1992, the beautiful 'Lucky Man' reminding us that ELP could write a slick ballad if they wanted to. One of the stand out moments is 'Pirates' being performed in Montreal in 1977, accompanied by a full orchestra – ambitious and pompous in equal measures.

For some reason the performance of the Legendary 'Fanfare For A Common Man' is not the one with ELP looking cold all dressed up in flying jackets playing in a stadium. Instead it is a combination of the Montreal 1977 and Albert Hall 1992 shows together, which makes for confusing viewing, much like most of this DVD I am afraid.

Ray Paul

JEFF LYNNE'S ELO – 'LIVE IN HYDE PARK' *(Eagle)* PROGRESSIVE

Billed as Jeff Lynne's ELO, this show sold out in minutes when it was announced on the Chris Evans Radio 2 show in 2014. I was actually lucky enough to attend and witness this event and it turned out to be one of the most memorable gigs ever for me, not to mention the first show in over thirty years Lynne had played live.

Here you have the complete show released on DVD and Blu-ray formats, though sadly not in surround sound, just plain old stereo. It comes with a colour booklet and the disc also features the excellent documentary 'Mr Blue Sky: The Story of Jeff Lynne & ELO'.

Looking at the track-listing ELO fans will be very impressed, though I was also struck by the amount of hit songs not played! 'Last Train To London', 'Twilight', 'Calling America', 'Wild West Hero' to name but a few. This is testament to the song-writing genius that is Lynne.

The show opens with 'All Over The World', a song never performed live by ELO, backed by the BBC Concert Orchestra, a host of session musicians and backing singers; the sound is quite superb. The backing screen features moving images to accompany the song titles, including at various points the legendary ELO logo and spaceship.

Purists may bemoan the absence of original drummer Bev Bevan, though having original keyboard player Richard Tandy playing alongside Lynne is a nice touch.

Wearing his trademark sunglasses and still with shaggy hair, it looks like time has stood still for Lynne. His voice throughout the show is terrific, especially on 'Telephone Line' and when he addresses the crowd you can tell how nervous and overwhelmed he was at the time.

The early ELO years of 'Evil Woman' and 'Showdown' sound superb and the backing singers do a great job, Lynne throws in 'Handle With Care' from his time with The Travelling Wilburys, complete with original video playing behind him, though for me the inclusion of 'Steppin' Out' (a song never performed in concert before) is a wonderful moment.

The classic 'Out Of The Blue' release is well served with 'Sweet Talkin' Woman', 'Turn To Stone' and of course his signature tune 'Mr Blue Sky'. Watching all of Hyde Park sing along to the latter is something quite special, and you can understand why Jeff Lynne said this was one of the most memorable shows he ever played.

Ray Paul

KNIGHT AREA – 'HYPERLIVE' *(Metal Mind)* PROGRESSIVE

Many of you reading this will have contributed to a crowd-funding appeal which has enabled a band/artist to record and release something that would have been out of reach based on their own resources or without significant label support. I was delighted to help this project see the light of day and get my copy months ahead of the official release.

This CD/DVD combo may not win any awards for slickness or the brilliance of the camerawork but I for one don't care, and I doubt their fans will either. It shows Knight Area for what they are, a very good band with great songs. I like the honesty of this release, although some might challenge me on that when it comes to the backing vocals which are on computer. However, unlike some, the band hasn't tried to hide this fact and from my perspective the rest of it doesn't appear to have been tinkered with or fixed in the studio so that's fine with me. Mark Smit's vocals aren't pristine but they are real and I like that.

Musically this is fantastic, reinforcing my liking of this band and validating my investment in the venture. If there's one unfortunate element it's the seemingly small audience present for the recording in Poland which makes for rather muted crowd reaction at the end of each song that doesn't do the band's performance sufficient justice.

My research indicates that on the night they played their 'Hyperdrive' album in its entirety, but here they've left out one of those tracks out. There's an extremely well-conceived and constructed medley of songs from their other albums that flows expertly and an encore of the epic 'Mortal Brow'.

All five musicians are terrific but I have to pick out guitarist Mark Bogert and keyboardist Gerben Klazinga who both excel throughout. Bogert riffs like a demon and his solos are terrific, never falling into the trap of overplaying or descending into parody; Klazinga's no slouch either easily reeling off meaningful and tasteful solos. I have to say it was nice to see someone with a bank of keyboards, like the good old days. A classic example of these traits can be found in 'The Lost World', but then again I could cite every track.

Every song is full of melody, hooks and splendid refrains; the style puts me in mind of a cross between Balance Of Power, Pallas and IQ. To my way of thinking the band has toughened its sound a bit with the more recent albums; the medley of older material is imbued with this additional power.

This is a really decent live release and one I'll be visiting regularly.

Gary Marshall

NEAL MORSE – 'MORSEFEST! 2014' *(Radiant)* PROGRESSIVE

Playing two completely different sets in the one weekend, this audio-visual account of the Morsefest! 2014 event in Neal Morse's local church in Nashville carries the self-explanatory subtitle 'Testimony and One Live'. Quite why he chose to do the whole of 'Testimony' again when there's already a 2CD/DVD available is anyone's guess, but for what it's worth the first half of this huge 4CD/2DVD (or Blu-Ray) box-set is a better performance of Morse's journey to enlightenment and happiness than the one released previously.

Assisted by his regular rhythm section of bassist Randy George and drummer Mike Portnoy, the band is fleshed out by no less than sixteen other musicians and backing vocalists, of which guitarist Eric Gillette, keyboardist Bill Hubauer and violinist Eric Brenton play the most prominent supporting roles.

Morse frequently switches from keys to guitar, or goes walkabout with just his headset microphone, but invariably pours emotion into every second of songs like 'The Prince Of The Power Of The Air' and 'Wasted Life', frequently bursting into tears with gratitude for both his own life and the people who travelled from all over the world to witness the event.

Visually the beginning is a bit patchy with shaky cameras and bad angles, but things improve as it goes on and the lighting is much better than the previous 'Testimony' DVD. Musically it's astounding how it all came together, the string players and choir adding a passion to the story that even tops the studio version. Other highlights include the Prog-tastic pairing of 'Break Of Day' and 'Power In The Air', the stirring 'It's All That I Can Do', the encores from 'Testimony 2' and Spock's Beard's 'Wind At My Back'.

I much prefer the first half of the story before Morse is saved and gets too "preachy", and still find it corny that the whole band change from dark to white clothes from the point where he receives the message from God and his life begins to turn around. Midway through the set, Morse fanboy Portnoy gives a heartfelt speech about his most constant co-collaborator, it's a poignant moment that is roundly applauded by all present.

The second day is an identical camera set-up as Morse and the big band run through the 'One' album fairly faithfully to the original. One of the most underrated records in his catalogue, in contrast to the format of 'Testimony', it contains some really long pieces like the eighteen minute 'The Creation' and the similarly lengthy 'The Separated Man', which are played perfectly despite being among Morse's most complex works.

Highlights are the constantly changing 'Author Of Confusion' and the relatively succinct 'Cradle To The Grave', but there are no low points and Morse even squeezes the limited edition bonus track 'King Jesus' into the middle of the set. The magnificent encores will appeal to fans of his other bands, with his brother joining in on guitar for SB's calling card, 'The Light', whilst Transatlantic's epic 'Stranger In Your Soul' brings the weekend to a close. For the sake of fitting the shows onto four CD's and over five hours of music, all encores from both days are at the end of disc four but otherwise are exactly as played.

Bassist George has put together a documentary that shows the ups and downs of the Morsefest! event and how difficult it was to put together, but it's obvious that everyone involved enjoyed the experience, even if it's the kind of thing that Morse and Portnoy have done frequently in their careers and something you'll probably only watch once.

On the whole this is a sprawling, all-encompassing package that's essential to any fan. There are few artists who could keep your attention for over five hours but Neal Morse is definitely near the top of that list.

Phil Ashcroft

PAGAN'S MIND – 'FULL CIRCLE: LIVE AT CENTER STAGE' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* PROGRESSIVE

In 2003 a young Norwegian Progressive Metal band called Pagan's Mind played a new music festival called Prog Power U.S.A. They had just released their second album 'Celestial Entrance' and were astounded by the reception they and it received at the show.

Over the years the band have returned to play at PPUSA, but in 2014 with the idea of coming 'Full Circle', they decided to celebrate the anniversary of that first show with a triumphant return to PPUSA's Center Stage with the band playing '…Entrance' in its entirety whilst recording it all for posterity on DVD/2CD. They did all this as a thank you to the festival, the fans who attended the shows and especially their fans from around the world, who have stuck by them since day one.

So what do you get visually? Well it's almost two hours and forty minutes of wonderful Melodic Progressive Metal, played by five of the best musicians who are working in Rock music today. Filmed in front of a rabid PPUSA audience, the show is shot by multiple cameras and, courtesy of Tommy Hansen, it has a great sound mix that on the DVD and Blu-Ray will be respectively 5.1 and DTS, which is something to look forward to I feel.

Of the show and performances all I can say is that in vocalist Nils K. Rue they have not just a powerful voice but someone who has a natural rapport and welcoming persona that the fans love, whilst Steinar Krokmo, Stian Kristoffersen and Ronny Tegner (bass, drum and keyboards respectively) all show what true talents they are. The ace in PM's hand however is guitarist Jorn Viggo Lofstad who throughout this DVD is just simply amazing. His dexterity, musicality and feel make each PM song stand out and you're mesmerized from the minute his fingers hit the fret-board until the song ends.

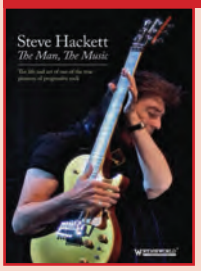
Here's the proof (if it's needed) that what you're going to see and hear is well worth your hard earned money. Starting off with the '…Entrance' album Pagan's Mind perform the songs with gusto; 'Approaching', 'Through Osiris Eyes', 'Entrance Stargate', 'Of Epic Questions', 'Dimensions Of Fire', 'Dreamscape Lucidity', 'The Seven Sacred Promises', 'Back To The Magic Of Childhood I: Conception', 'Back To The Magic Of Childhood II: Exploring Life', 'In Brilliant White Light', 'Aegean Shores', 'The Prophecy Of Pleiades' and 'New World Order' are all there and the band really look like they are relishing playing this album all in one go.

Then after a short 'Intermission' they return to the stage and play nine more of their best songs that further captivate the watcher/listener. 'Enigmatic Mission', 'Live Your Life Like A Dream', Bowie's 'Hallo Spaceboy', the superb epic instrumental 'Full Circle', 'Walk Away In Silence', 'Eyes Of Fire' (where we find Circus Maximus vocalist Michael Eriksen lending a hand), 'God's Equation' and 'United Alliance' are delivered with aplomb by a band who, on this evidence, have few equals in the genre.

As DVD's go this one is as good as it gets. Okay there's nothing like a KISS stage show going on but, in its place, we get a band who don't put a foot wrong all night and play from their hearts, which in the end is all we can really ask for.

Ian Johnson

STEVE HACKETT – 'THE MAN, THE MUSIC' *(Weinerworld)* PROGRESSIVE



Regular readers of Fireworks will be all too aware of my admiration for the work of Steve Hackett, both as a solo artist and during the halcyon period of Genesis; I will forever contend that his departure from the band was more impactful than that of Peter Gabriel.

With Hackett's recent massive success with the 'Genesis Revisited' albums and extensive tours the time was probably right for this pretty comprehensive DVD documentary. With such a significant career and so many albums under his belt, this could have been a rather dull chronological retelling of the story of his life and an album by album appraisal. However, Producers, Jelena Jancic and Matt Groom have done a good job (aside from some eclectic camerawork) of picking out pivotal moments and interspersing the historical passages with vignettes of guitar technique (which I suspect buddying guitarists will devour as Hackett demonstrates his secrets), studio/recording snippets, concert segments from a gig at Leamington Spa and interviews with band-mates, family and the ubiquitous Steven Wilson. I know that Hackett's mum has been very supportive throughout his career and her enthusiasm and pride are still very much in evidence.

The studio footage with Roger King (keyboards and production) is amusing as they come across as a double act with King being wonderfully obtuse and deadpan. Poignantly, there's an interview with the recently deceased Chris Squire (Yes), an extended version making up the bonus extra. I couldn't help but chuckle when I saw on the bookshelf behind Squire a copy of 'Fifty Shades Of Grey'.

It also seems to be a very truthful release with Hackett not holding back, not least when mentioning the period of depression that resulted from his divorce from Kim Poor, a demon he exorcised on the track 'Fire On The Moon'. He's both very generous and, at times, a little oblique about his Genesis days and the characters in the band. His assessment of their musical prowess is telling and admirable but my take on some of the more knowing comments would seem to be directed at Tony Banks and his ego. He also confides about label politics and managers.

Clearly the footage was assembled over an extended period as there's studio stuff from his 'Beyond The Shrouded Horizon' album from 2011 through to a contemporary interview about '…Revisited'. His classical work also gets an airing.

I'm on the same wavelength as Hackett when he contends that 'Firth Of Fifth' is the best song Genesis produced. The section when he plays his iconic solo from it is a personal highlight.

I expect Steve Hackett fans to get a great deal from this release.

Gary Marshall

SHORT - SHARP - SHOTS OF - ROCK!

Steven Reid takes a look at new EP releases

There may not be quite as many big name bands as we've come to expect in SSSOR this issue, however there are still some a-list musicians and alongside a selection of acts you'll undoubtedly want to become acquainted with, there's much to recommend. So with no further ado…

A band which can trace their roots back to the pre-formative NWOBHM years, VARDIS recorded four albums between 1980 and 1986. Paying homage to their '100MPH' debut, this first set of new recordings in nearly three decades is simply titled '200MPH'. Never one of the more refined acts to come from that time, Vardis always relied on a deeply loose Blues feel to their Hard Rock and Metal and this comeback is no different. The mainstays of Steve Zodiac (guitar/vocals) and Terry Horbury (bass) are joined by drummer Joe Clancy, who arrived earlier this year; the trio already sounding like a seasoned unit. Four studio cuts relive the old days, 'Jolly Roger' a serious clatter of drums that careens into wailing vocals via a fuzzed-up riff, while 'Move Along' surges with a cacophonous Blues authority. Add in the loose but tight live rendition of 'The World's Insane' and those who've been waiting a long time for this release, won't be disappointed.

Even with the likes of Sean Peck (Death Dealer/Cage) on vocals, Marc Grabowski (Corruption/Demonica) on bass and Snowy Shaw (King Diamond/Mercyful Fate/Therion/Dream Evil) on drums, the real reason to get excited about 'SATAN'S TOMB' is that it comes from DENNER/SHERMANN, or as they're better known Michael Denner and Hank Shermann, the ex-guitar attack of MF. Fireworks readers may well know Shermann from the MHR heroes Fate, while Denner also served time with KD. However here the pair simply pay homage to their classic sound, as Peck utilises a more gravely than falsetto-infused attack to still add an air of the Diamond to proceedings. 'New Gods' is an ever evolving push and shove of broiling riffs and searing vocals, while 'War Witch' is more focused on a high energy fret explosion, highlighting both Shermann and Denner's fret fury. The title track is pure MF drama and atmosphere, allowing 'Seven Skulls' to leave little doubt where Ghost got their best ideas from. This however is the real deal.

Receiving a press release comparing a band to Mallory Knox, Alexisonfire or Fall Out Boy may be as frequent an event as me throwing my smelly socks in the washer (possibly more so… Phew!). And yet when Ipswich's FENRIR can add a dirty, dirty, dirty riff to 'Victory Rose II', a Wildhearts-lite closing to 'Bones' and make 'Einn' a beautiful piece of instrumental plucking and strumming, you have to admit they have some unexpected aspects up their sleeves. That the moments which stay more faithful to the well-worn influences manage to completely convince as well, doesn't exactly hurt, allowing 'THE RISE' to be way more interesting than initially expected.

That SHIRAZ LANE have recently toured with Santa Cruz should give you a fair indication of where this Finnish outfit are coming from (apart from Finland, obviously). Traces of Skid Row, Dynazty and especially in the vocals Slaughter, leave a strong, pleasant taste as this young act kick up an action packed storm through an upbeat vibe and endearing sneer. Unsurprisingly as they crash through 'Money Talks', 'Mental Slavery' and 'Out There Somewhere', elements of SC also spring to mind, meaning that to suggest that SL are offering anything vaguely new, would be an exaggeration. However with a whole-hearted approach and bags of attitude, you won't really care. 'BE THE SLAVE OR BE THE CHANGE' may be a bit of a mouthful, but it'll sure as hell leave you smiling.

The title track of 'INCINERATOR' simply explodes through the door, mid-paced guns pounding all in its sights, vocalist Jamie Lailey spitting and snarling with a thunderous authority and no little guile. Backed by the superstar team of Toby Jepson (Little Angels/Saxon/The Answer) behind the production desk, Mike Fraser (AC/DC/Metallica/Aerosmith) on mixing duties and Simon Francis (Kodaline/Primal Scream) who masters this twin guitar smack of Rock 'n' Roll, 'Buzzed Up City' is a beefed up rip-roar of AC/DC, 'Here Comes The Shot' an unexpected stick of classic era W.A.S.P. dynamite and 'Lay Me To Waste' a slightly more aggressive saturation of Slash. Prepare to have a new favourite band, they're called CITY OF THIEVES and they're pretty damn fantastic!

Close your eyes, turn round three times and yes, there's another twenty bands hammering out that authentic modernised Black Stone Cherry, Alter Bridge and Slash sound. However, when at least one of those acts is as good as KODIAK JACK, who's complaining? The guitar sound on 'Sirens' is gargantuan as it drives the four top notch selections to captivating conclusions. Having already convinced on their first two full-lenghters ,'SCARS' is actually a step up, the confidence shown on 'All I Want' delivering on that early promise. Lead vocalist Bryn Roberts also puts in his finest performance, leaving no doubt KJ have arrived.

With a guitar smack that jostles and jousts and reminds of (as expected - see above!) AB or Stone Sour, Italy's MATALEÒN decide to step off the gas and focus on the detail. It's a smart starting point, the bluster many young acts blow hard with left by the wayside. Instead 'Il Foglio Bianco' makes a statement through considered, pin-point jabs of guitar and (as you've guessed) Italian language vocals. The production is impressive and this lot ain't afraid to use that fact to showcase their talents, 'Ozymandias' and 'Dove Sei Adessu' adding a powering surge to the attack. Resulting in this EP being a surprising and impressive 'PERSPECTIVE OF AN IDEA'.

With more than a passing nod to Buns 'n' Toasties (that's Guns 'n' Roses to you and me) and SR, the U.K.'s VOODOO VEGAS have all too quietly gone about their business. I say "quiet" for with the raucous racket this lot make we should have been hearing them from miles off. Here all four cuts, 'Hypnotise', 'Tied Up', 'Round & Round' and 'Killing Joke' all equally vie for your attention, the classic Hard Rockin' sound augmented through a cutting edge and sack after sack of attitude, energy and vibrancy. They've been a secret for too long, so get ready for VV to cast their spell, as they 'HYPNOTISE'.

Featuring members of Nasty Savage, Death, Obituary, Testament, Iced Earth, Purgatory, Massacre and many more, BLOOD DIVISION is both the band and EP name for this two track charity release. Add in vocals from Chris Jericho and the NS cover 'The Morgue' becomes a mighty updated blast of NWOBHM madness. With guitars from Ralph Santolla, Dave Austin, Bill Owen, John Malloney and Ben Meyer, you can also rest assured that the Scorpions 'Top Of The Bill' receives headliner treatment. With a portion of the proceeds going to the Rock & Rescue charity, BD give you the chance to feel good, while you seriously Rock Out!

Can it really be possible that here we have yet another young, up and coming U.K. Classic Rock act ready and willing to knock you sideways? Well, if 'SWEETHEART OF THE SLUMS' is anything to go by, then in the shape of DIRTY THRILLS indeed we do. With a 2013 EP and 2014 album already behind them, there's no sign of the Led Zeppelin meets Aerosmith vibe losing its cool, as 'Letterbomb' bursts with an almighty bang. 'Feeling' grinds, grooves and boogies, while 'Hourglass' throws all the right shapes. The list of young U.K. bands delivering this style may be getting lengthy but when they provide these type of Dirty Thrills, then why not?

When LEOGUN toured the U.K. earlier this year with Lynyrd Skynyrd, they impressed in a decidedly Zeppelin-inspired manner. Hence I was intrigued to hear that on 'MAJICK POTION' the Leds are barely nodded at. Yes the riff-tastic title cut and 'Disconnected' still surge and swerve but this is much more contemporary fare and a little heavier. 'Beauty Queen' brings a little more refinement to the brew, before 'It's Okay' proves much better than that; haunting vocals lifting a slow beat to quite captivating heights. Having seen this band live, I expected Leogun to be good, but not this good and not with this sound.

THIRSTY is the brain child of The Quireboys founder and song-writer Guy Bailey, the guitarist and singer collaborating with Russian poet Irina D. The deep, dark lyrical themes, courtesy of Irina, tackle subjects from the lobotomising of Rosemary Kennedy (sister of JFK) on order of her father, the friendship between a Mafioso and an FBI agent, and a Soviet WWII sharp shooter who killed over three hundred enemy fighters. With one-time Rolling Stones co-conspirator Chris Kimsey on board and an ethos of keeping the songs at 7" length (under or around the three minute mark), it's no surprise the vibe reeks of the ramshackle end of the Stones; being almost beyond authentically retro and into kitsch. Bailey's co-Quirer Chris Johnstone handles bass, Lynne Jackson (Saint Jude) backing vocals and Simon Hanson (Death In Vegas/Squeeze) drums. Yet, even with all the star power (and celeb press endorsements; Kimsey, Phil Alexander, Richard Cole and Sharon Osbourne) the end results feel so squeezed into a narrow vision that while it's easy to admire 'THIRSTY' it's hard to suggest it leaves you anything other than underwhelmed.

Averaging a couple of EPs a year, the ever evolving JOHN TAGLIERI takes another turn on 'TRUE BELIEVER'. This time he is Rocking and then some. Meaty guitars and insistent riffs abound but the key is Taglieri's trademarks of sharp hooks and mean melodies. Factor in that this chap has a cracking voice and this self-sufficient musician has come up trumps again. 'Way Out' broods and bustles, 'True Believer' adds a Classic Rock bite, while 'Take This Ride' offers a grown up version of Bon Jovi. Whether he's Rocking hard, utilising his AOR sensibilities, or introducing a Country air, Taglieri always delivers. 'True Believer'? Too right.

A truly international project, SCREAMING BEAST bring together two Danes, a Welshman and a Hungarian. So obviously (ahem) these guys delight in laying down the law with a heavy Southern groove. A more restrained Pantera is a good starting point, as is a pumped-up Black Label Society. Add in a hammer smash of Killswitch Engage and In Flames and you're well on your way to imagining 'Giving Into Fear', 'Silent Submission' and 'This Dawn This Day'. Vocalist Anton War takes no persuasion to display his snarling, biting charms, while guitarist Daniel Mucs knows exactly how to bring drama, brutality and precision in equal proportions. 'TO ASSAIL AND CONQUER' should be no trouble at all for SB.

Well this is an unusual departure for a drummer seen as one of Rock's mainstays and yet it's more a case of revisiting his past as DEAN PARRISH & CARMINE APPICE team up fifty years down the line from when they last worked together. The title, 'NORTHERN SOUL' is self-explanatory but not in the way the U.K. means it, although there's little Hard Rock in evidence. That may prove a step too far for some of the Ozzy Osbourne/Blue Murder/Cactus drummer's numerous fans and yet if the Motown vibe is one you can live with, 'I'm On My Way' or 'Lonely' will prove reasonably enjoyable.

BOOKMARK

Rob McKenzie provides an overview of essential reading for music lovers everywhere

'A WIZARD, A TRUE STAR: TODD RUNDGREN IN THE STUDIO' PAUL MYERS *(Jawbone Press)*

Todd Rundgren should be a household name not only in terms of his album output, both solo and with Utopia, but also due to the back catalogue of albums he has produced. The list includes working with Meat Loaf, New York Dolls, Hall & Oates, XTC, Psychedelic Furs, Cheap Trick and many more.

Although the book title suggests this book only covers Rundgren's producer/engineer endeavours, it actually is a comprehensive biography of his wider career and personal life. As a result, I learnt a lot about his formative years as guitarist with the 1960's Nazz and then his early years as house engineer for Bearsville Records where he also recorded his first solo albums.

Regarding details on producing; there is some technical information but to be honest if you are not interested those bits can be skipped leaving you to focus on the relationships Rundgren had with the recording artists. A bit of generalisation of the book's tales but most of these relationships were strained; however all quotes from the artists concerned were in hindsight very positive about the end result and also Rundgren's skill at getting the most out of them.

The most famous and successful album that Rundgren produced was 'Bat Out Of Hell' (the album has sold by many accounts forty-five million plus) which is covered in detail. Rundgren also played the lead guitar, including the famous motorbike bit and contributed background vocals, so was very much the third ingredient adding to the Jim Steinman/Meat Loaf mix.

The book covers all solo and Utopia albums as well as Rundgren's third party production efforts and shows the transition from recording live to analogue tape to his eventual Line6 and ProTools set-up on more recent albums such as 'Liars'. His innovations with sampling and interactive CDIs are also covered.

A common theme in the book is that Rundgren was so ahead of the curve in so many things (e.g. video creation and PatroNet, where the audience pays for an album before it's made) that he personally never gained worldwide fame out of them. It was more that he was a trailblazer that helped enable the technology to be in place for the next generation.

A must for Todd Rundgren fans and a testament to the wizard and true star.

'BILLY JOEL: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN ANGRY YOUNG MAN' HANK BORDOWITZ *(Backbeat Books)*

Billy Joel's is a complex story; the man himself plus many close friends and musicians did not contribute to the book but people who were once close to him do get their say. The book touches on the managers and musicians who were left in Joel's wake and also on a number of legal wranglings that involved millions of dollars.

A key tale from this well-written book is that 1993's 'River Of Dreams' was the last original work he wrote (apart from a couple of songs written much later) and this album was the point where he turned his back on Pop to devote himself to Classical Music. This decision would appear to be in part due to his estranged father's and step-brother's Classical background. The paradox is that he continues to play his Pop Rock back catalogue with aplomb to sell-out crowds who are more than happy to listen to songs from the classic 'Turnstiles', 'The Stranger' and '52nd Street' from the seventies.

In part the book is downbeat – the aforementioned financial issues, multiple marriage collapses and whispers of drugs and alcohol. On the other hand, the book also rejoices with the success of Joel – from a poor background with a father walking out on him to becoming one of the most successful singer/song-writers ever.

Key songs are discussed and the back pages show the vastness of his album and single sales and the number of awards he has won. One final revelation is that Billy Joel does not overly rate his Rock stardom, his voice and his piano playing ability – that's hard to understand!

'RECKLESS LIFE, GUNS 'N' ROSES: A GRAPHIC NOVEL' JIM MCCARTHY & MARC OLIVENT *(Omnibus Press)*

The latest in a series of grown-up graphic novels from Omnibus Press is one about a very graphic band – Guns 'N' Roses. Of course, in the end it has become Axl Rose's band but the beginning was very different.

Each member came from an unorthodox background and ended up together in the 1980's melting pot of the Sunset Strip. A perfect backdrop for the book to illustrate the band's beginning against. Told in rotation from each member of the band with what I presume are actual quotes from the guys in speech bubbles, the complex story unfolds.

After each line-up change, which increased following the 'Spaghetti Incident' album, the book keeps the reader informed with what the members of the classic line-up got up to next – so Velvet Revolver are mentioned in the story plus Duff McKagan's and Slash's previous bands. However, the last quarter of the book is really all about Rose and his ascent or descent (according to your point of view) into being the ruler of the Guns 'N' Roses brand. The last pages don't hold out hope for a triumphant rebirth though.

A good choice for a graphic novel; as they say a picture paints a thousand words and this book's got a lot of pictures!

'LIVE TO WIN: A CASUAL GUIDE TO THE MUSIC OF KISS FRONT-MAN PAUL STANLEY' – NEIL DANIELS *(Createspace)*

The latest in Neil Daniels' "casual guide" series is about the solo career of Paul Stanley (a.k.a. the Starchild of KISS). Knowing that his career is forever entwined with KISS, Daniels starts the book with a history of the band. This sets the scene appropriately and explains Stanley's ventures into solo territory; the first being in 1978 when all four members of KISS simultaneously released solo albums as part of a massive marketing campaign. Stanley's one was well received, although only charted the third highest.

Long term collaborator Bob Kulick is frequently quoted throughout, as are the majority of Stanley's band members and are all praiseworthy of the man. The only slight dissent was a mention of Stanley wanting KISS songs to stay close to the original and not being re-interpreted live with extended soloing.

Stanley's less popular second album, 2006's 'Live To Win', is discussed and the general consensus is that it ended up too modern and too far away from the KISS sound that fans and critics wanted.

Elsewhere in the book, I learnt that Stanley played the lead in the Toronto-based 'Phantom Of The Opera' show for a while and that he has a sandwich named after him in a local New York Subway™ shop.

Proof that this enjoyable read will also help make you a Paul Stanley expert.

'SNAKES! GUILLOTINES! ELECTRIC CHAIRS! MY ADVENTURES IN THE ALICE COOPER GROUP' DENNIS DUNAWAY & CHRIS HODENFIELD *(Omnibus Press)*

This is a thoroughly entertaining autobiography by the bassist of Alice Cooper. No, not the person that is Cooper's bassist but the bassist when AC was a band. Musos know the difference but maybe the rest of the world doesn't remember.

Anyway, Dennis Dunaway makes the distinction clear; he was a founder member of AC and provided creative content and helped pen quite a few hits to boot. The metamorphism of the AC (the band) to Vince Furnier becoming Cooper and the rest of the band jettisoned (not clear exactly by whom) is told in a resigned tone.

This is certainly Dunaway's side of the story (and rightly so) but it sure is a fascinating one. First-hand encounters with Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix proves that and AC (the band) left its mark on Rock history (by the way the group has been inducted in the Rock 'N' Roll Hall Of Fame, not just Cooper himself).

The book covers the Arizonian school days' formation of the band, several name changes, a couple of albums in Frank Zappa's stable to their heyday with 'School's Out' and 'Billion Dollar Babies'. Most of Dennis Dunaway's life in that period appeared to be on the road and there are funny stories galore of this proto-Glam band on stage in the conservative Mid-West.

As Rock autobiographies go, this is a true page-turner.

'THE GREATEST ALBUMS YOU'LL NEVER HEAR' BRUNO MACDONALD *(Aurum Press)*

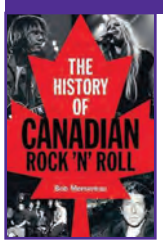
As editor Bruno MacDonald admits, the real title of the book is 'The Greatest Albums You'll Never Hear In Quite The Way The Artists Intended At The Time'. This explains everything because some of the stories contained within are about well-known album titles. For example, the story of Bruce Springsteen's 'Nebraska' is covered. The reason for its inclusion is that it was also recorded as a full E Street band affair before being finally released as per the original four track solo recordings.

The book does cover totally lost albums such as Van Halen's 'IV' which was in the middle of being recorded when Gary Cherone was let go from the band. Its eventual release is not considered likely – the book chapters end with a score out of ten for the likelihood of a release, in this case it is 1/10!

As you can imagine, the more complicated the artist or the band's membership, the more likely a "lost album" or two ensues. So without surprise Neil Young and Pink Floyd are covered. Eventually Young will have all his back material out on release but the book predicts (maybe in a non-joking way) that it will be 2045 when 'Chrome Dreams' is released.

This is a detailed book (over two hundred and fifty pages long) mainly focussing on Rock (with some Pop and Rap) and there are stories of interest for a broad spectrum and also great photos of the artists and their associated album art.

'THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN ROCK 'N' ROLL' BOB MERSEREAU *(Backbeat Books)*



Shamelessly making a case for Canada being acknowledged as an important factor in the history of Rock, Bob Mersereau has produced a worthy chronicle of Canadian artists who have made their mark on the world. Things are also set up nicely with an engaging foreword by Neal Peart of Rush.

It is fair to say Neil Young crops up quite a bit in the proceedings and he certainly is represented well in the appendices listing key Canadian songs. However, less obvious (to me!) Canadian artists are Bachman Turner Overdrive and Leonard Cohen.

Of course from the Rock side of the house, the book covers Bryan Adams, Nickelback and the aforementioned Rush whereas female powerhouses are represented well in the form of Shania Twain, Alanis Morissette, Avril Lavigne and Celine Dion.

So clearly this is a distinguished Canadian home-grown list and proves the point of the book; Mersereau strives and succeeds on the whole in making the book cohesive with intertwining tales of the artists. One for Rock history lovers.

PLAYLISTS

Ant Heeks compiles our writers' top picks this issue, where Iron Maiden's stunning new double album sends its competitors Running to the Hills.

Bruce Mee

1. **Def Leppard** – Def Leppard
2. **W.A.S.P.** – Golgotha
3. **Khymera** – The Grand Design
4. **Martina Edoff** – Unity
5. **Find Me** – Dark Angel

Dave Scott

1. **Delain** – The Human Contradiction
2. **Leah** – Kings And Queens

3. **Phantasma** – The Deviant Hearts
4. **Jaded Star** – Memories From The Future
5. **Martina Edoff** – Unity

James Gaden

1. **Chris Norman** – Crossover
2. **Jon Stevens** – Woman
3. **Rhino's Revenge** – II
4. **The Winery Dogs** – Hot Streak
5. **Chris Thompson** – Won't Lie Down

Steven Reid

1. **Cats In Space** – Too Many Gods
2. **Joel Hoekstra's 13** – Dying To Live
3. **Symphony X** – Underworld
4. **Orpheus Blade** – Wolf's Cry
5. **Nemo** – Coma

Ant Heeks

1. **Def Leppard** – Def Leppard
2. **W.A.S.P.** – Golgotha
3 **Shinedown** – Threat To Survival
4. **Iron Maiden** – The Book Of Souls
5. **Don Henley** – Cass County

Rob McKenzie

1. **Russ Ballard** – It's Good To Be Here
2. **Grave Digger** – Exhumation: The Early Years
3. **Guns N' Roses** – Appetite For Destruction
4. **Todd Rundgren** – Global
5. **Graham Bonnet** – Here Comes The Night

Phil Ashcroft

1. **Teramaze** – Her Halo
2. **Queensryche** – Condition Human
3. **Newman** – The Elegance Machine
4. **Diatessaron** – Sunshine
5. **Stryper** – Fallen

Monica Castedo–Lopez

1. **The Winery Dogs** – Hot Streak
2. **Lynch Mob** – Rebel
3. **Voodoo Hill** – Waterfall
4. **Michael Monroe** –Blackout States
5. **Screaming Eagles** – Stand Up & Be Counted

Ian Johnson

1. **Subsignal** – The Beacons Of Somewhere Sometime
2. **Riverside** – Love, Fear And The Time Machine
3. **Vanden Plas** – Chronicles Of The Immortals: Netherworld II
4. **Cats In Space** – Too Many Gods
5. **W.A.S.P.** – Golgotha

Dave Bott

1. **Disturbed** – Immortalized
2. **Five Finger Death Punch** – Got Your Six
3. **Pop Evil** – Up
4. **Black Stone Cherry** – Thank You, Livin' Live DVD
5. **A Course Of Action** – Treason

Ray Paul

1. **Iron Maiden** – The Book Of Souls
2. **Ghost** – Meilora
3. **Jeff Lynne's ELO** – Live In Hyde Park DVD
4. **Wucan** – Sow The Wind
5. **ELP** – Live At Montreux 1997

Gary Marshall

1. **Steve Hackett** – Premonitions
2. **Nad Sylvan** – Courting The Widow
3. **Kamelot** – Haven
4. **Riverside** – Love, Fear And The Time Machine
5. **Tiger Moth Tales** – Storytellers: Part 1

Mike Newdeck

1. **Rob Thomas** – The Great Unknown
2. **The Manic Shine** – Trial & Triumph
3. **Southern Gentlemen** – Quarter Life Come Up
4. **Black Tide** – Chasing Shadows
5. **Trivium** – Silence In The Snow

Dave Cockett

1. **Demon's Eye** – Under The Neon
2. **Iron Maiden** – The Book Of Souls
3. **Stratovarius** – Eternal
4. **Lifeline** – Scream
5. **C.O.P.** – State Of Rock

Alan Holloway

1. **Ozone** – Ozone
2. **Iron Maiden** – The Book Of Souls
3. **C.O.P** – State Of Rock
4. **Newman** – The Elegance Machine
5. **Joel Hoekstra's 13** – Dying To Live

Julia Braun

1. **Jen Majura** – Jen Majura
2. **Axxis** – 25 Years Of Rock And Power CD/DVD
3. **Symphony X** – Underworld
4. **Helloween** – My God–Given Right
5. **21Octayne** – 2.0

Carl Buxton

1. **Joey Hoekstra's 13** – Dying To Live
2. **Chantel McGregor** – Lose Control
3. **The Jokers** – Hurricane
4. **Khymera** – The Grand Design
5. **Find Me** – Dark Angel

Mark Donnelly

1. **Reds'Cool** – Press Hard
2. **Iron Maiden** – The Book Of Souls
3. **Royal Hunt** – Dirty Dozen
4. **Joel Hoekstra's 13** – Dying To Live
5. **Ten** – The Dragon & Saint George EP

Alexandra Mrozowska

1. **Jac Dalton** – Powderkeg
2. **Kelly Keeling** – Mind Radio
3. **Piotr Wojcicki** – Moon City
4. **C.O.P.** – State Of Rock
5. **Hungryheart** – Dirty Italian Job

Duncan Jamieson

1. **Aron Scott** – Earthquake
2. **Old Man's Will** – Troubled Man
3. **Champlin/Williams/Friestedt** – CWF'
4. **Shooting Star** – Into The Night
5. **The Burros** – Maya

Ian Parry

1. **Gotthard** – Live and Bangin'
2. **Mad Max** – Thunder, Storm and Passion
3. **Bernie Torme** – Blackheart
4. **Gentlemans Pistols** – Hustler's Row
5. **The Dreaming Tree** – Silverfade

Az Chaudhry

1. **Iron Maiden** –The Book Of Souls
2. **Billy Sherwood** – The Citizen
3. **David Gilmour** – Rattle That Lock
4. **Halestorm**– Into The Wild Life

5. **Ten** – Isla De Muerta

Woody

1. **Voodoo Hill** – Waterfall
2. **Newman** – The Elegance Machine
3. **7thHeaven** – Next
4. **Echosmith** – Talking Dreams
5. **Phoenix Down** – Under A Wild Sky

Dawn Osborne

1. **Lynch Mob** – Rebel
2. **Autograph** – I Lost My Mind In America
3. **Stevie Lange** – Remember My Name
4. **Kix** – Rock Your Face Off
5. **George Lynch** – Shadowtrain

Dave Crompton

1. **Riverside** – Love, Fear And The Time Machine
2. **Ten** – The Dragon And Saint George EP

3. **Jo Harman** – Found A Place EP
4. **Art Nation** – Revolution
5. **Casablanca** – Miskatonic Graffiti

Michael Anthony

1. **Tim Bowness** – Stupid Things That Mean The World
2. **Operation: Mindcrime** – The Key
3. **Iron Maiden** – The Book of Souls
4. **Halestorm** – Into The Wild Life
5. **Leaves' Eyes** – King of Kings

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

1. **The V** – Now Or Never
2. **Ohrenfeindt** – Motor On
3. **Avatarium** – The Girl With The Raven Mask
4. **Royal Hunt** – XIII Devil's Dozen
5. **Blackmore's Night** – All Our Yesterdays

Steve Swift

1. **The Delta Saints** – Bones
2. **Motörhead** – Bad Magic

3. **The Trousers** – Mother Of illusion
4. **Absolva** – Never A Good Time To Die
5. **Prince** – Hit And Run

Helen Bradley – Owers

1. **The Winery Dogs** – Hot Streak
2. **JJ Grey And Mofro** – Orange Blossoms
3. **T–Rex** – The Best Of T Rex
4. **Terry Reid** – River
5. **Hollywood Vampires** – Hollywood Vampires

Mike Ainscoe

1. **Yes** – Progeny: Highlights From '72
2. **Amplifier** – Amplifier
3. **Riverside** – Love, Fear And The Time Machine
4. **Iron Maiden** – The Book Of Souls
5. **Caligula's Horse** – Bloom

Enrico Navella

1. **Queensryche** – Empire
2. **Blacklist Union** – Back To Momo
3. **Lynch Mob** – Rebel
4. **Danger Danger** – Screw It!
5. **Black Bambi** – One Night Only

BLOODSTOCK OPEN AIR

6TH-9TH AUGUST 2015 CATTON PARK WALTON ON TRENT DERBYSHIRE UK

Cards on the table here. We had never been to Bloodstock before. This would be our first time. This meant that a) I didn't have a clue how it worked, b) I didn't know where things were, and c) I probably wouldn't know half (or more), of the bands that were playing, which could be both a good thing, and a bad thing. To be honest, we were really only here to see Within Temptation headlining the main stage on Saturday night, but there was a while to go before then. With the thought that a lot of this was uncharted territory for us, I had buried my head in the program and noted down bands simply on how they looked (LGIP = Looked Good In Programme). I thought if they looked good, they would sound good, right? Well, you've got to start somewhere.

We were unable to get to the festival until later on Friday which meant that this was an "easeusin" day and the only band on my list was **Delain** who were the headline band on the second stage. We arrived at 8pm, and I was concerned in case they came on fairly early, and we missed the start. I did expect them to come on at 9pm, and I asked a lot of people, none of whom seemed to know. Eventually, I found out that they would hit the stage at 10:30, which meant that they wouldn't finish until 11:45. It wasn't going to be an early night. Delain is a star band that is constantly rising. They supported Within Temptation on their last tour, and now they are headlining stage two here. Every time I have seen Delain live they have always been excellent, and I expected the same tonight. What I didn't expect was to see a female guitarist on stage with them, namely Merel Bechtold, who apparently plays with a band called MaYaN. No idea why she was there, but the more the merrier. And as usual, the band was as tight as a tight thing, even with this addition, and did something from every album. 'Army Of Dolls', 'Stardust' and 'The Tragedy Of The Commons' from 'Human Contradiction', 'Pristine', 'Sleepwalker's Dream' and 'The Gathering' (complete with confetti canons) from 'Lucidity' and 'Stay Forever' from April Rain. The bulk of the set came from 'We Are The Others'; six songs in total, which wasn't surprising as the song itself was written about Sophie Lancaster, whose stage they were on. (They were actually scheduled for the main stage, but asked to play on this one instead).

The weather forecast for Saturday was quite good, so we were brave and went in without jackets. Churchill would have been proud of us. And as we walked in I heard the sound of orchestration/keyboards, which meant melody, music I could understand – PROG! So we walked over to where **Xerath** were performing, and while we had the sounds, it soon became very clear that these were on tape. And then the "vocalist" started up. So we moved on, but not before the band went off for five minutes due to guitarist technical problems. The vocals were okay during this bit! **Ethereal** were a LGIP band and were caked in make-up. Described as a Symphonic Black Metal band, the music was okay, as in it was discernible as music, but they did have a grunter for a vocalist, which did it for me. So, moving on again, we arrived at the main stage to see a band called **Korpiklaani**, a Folk Metal band from Finland. They were okay, and came across as a softer version of Turisas, and sang most of their songs in their native tongue, which meant I didn't understand a word of it. I didn't expect to see many crowd surfers for them. As I said, they are a softer version of Turisas, but there was a constant stream of people coming over the barriers throughout their set.

Back to the Sophie tent where **Godsized** were on next. These were quite good really. The singer sang, the musicians played music that I could keep up with, and nobody wore make-up, so I could see who they were. Again, no idea of song titles, but due to no theatrics and well-presented Blues/Rock, the tendency was to concentrate on the music. There was a bit of a break now as the next band I has listed was **Opeth**. Having been at festivals before where Opeth have been on, this would, however, be my first time actually seeing them as I was always doing something else when they were performing on previous occasions. And I quickly realised that I

liked their material, despite snatches of it featuring grunting for vocals. I understand that they have gone through a bit of a transformation since teaming up with Steven Wilson on production, and some of the old guard don't like the new stuff, particularly the gobby git behind us in the crowd, who tried to get everyone to agree with him, but who failed miserably. They did six songs, most of it newer material; 'Eternal Rains Will Come', (which thankfully they hadn't), 'Cusp Of Eternity', 'The Drapery Falls', 'The Devil's Orchard' and 'Heir Apparent'. There was banter between songs from Michael Akerfeldt, where he tried to sell both IKEA and Volvo to the crowd, but without much luck, and when he said that they only had limited time when announcing the last song, 'Deliverance,' he said not to worry as the song lasted three weeks. Nice to have a bit of humour thrown in. We then wandered over to the second stage to see **Jettblack**, described as a Classic Hard Rock band and hailing from High Wycombe. I would agree with the description, tight, tuneful and memorable choruses, the music they play is immediately accessible and they give the impression that there is much more to come from them in the future. I would advise you to check out their video for 'Raining Rock' on YouTube. Very amusing.

And so it was now time for the whole reason we were here. **Within Temptation** have become one of my favourite bands over the last few years, swapping masks and progressing from a definite gentler style into something different and more hard-edged. I have already seen them on this tour, so knew what to expect, but also hoped to see more of Sharon Den Adel at the front of the stage rather than standing at the back. There was a bit of a raised section at the back, so I was a little concerned, but I needn't have worried. And everything was going smoothly, until close to the end when they started 'Ice Queen', only for the PA to go silent. They tried twice more, and the same thing happened on each occasion, at roughly the same point each time. The down time was rescued by drummer Mike Coolen's drum solo, while everyone else left the stage, before they decided to miss out that song and carry on with 'Covered By

Roses', which was fine. So, as expected, WT gave an excellent performance, and I have made a note of how happy everybody seemed to be while doing it.

Sunday looked like being another fine and busy day and first on my list was an LGIP band from South Wales called **Triaxis**. The first thing to mention here is that the core of the band is three young ladies on guitar, vocals and bass. And I have to say that Krissie Kirby on vocals is deceptively good, dressed down as she was at the side of CJ on guitar and Becky Baldwin on bass. But she could certainly sing and they did six songs, 'Liberty', 'Sand And Silver', 'Stand Your Ground', 'Victorious', 'Death Machine' and 'Black Trinity', all old-school Classic Rock songs. I would have liked to have heard their version of Rainbow's 'Stargazer' but that was not to be. **Wolf**

are a Swedish Rock band with seven albums under their belts and of the eight songs they did the first three were 'Overture In C Shark', 'Shark Attack' and 'The Bite,' and I was starting to see a bit of a pattern here. The 7th song was called 'Venom,' so there you go. **Dead Label** were another LGIP band, and I made a note simply because they were a three-piece and they had a strikingly blonde drummer called Claire Percival. Unfortunately they were too Thrash for me, proving appearances can be deceptive, and I moved on. Next up was **Alunah** from Birmingham, another Female-Fronted band, who were described as Doom, Psychedelia and Classic Rock. All I could think of while watching them was Black Sabbath with dying batteries. The riffs were sloooowwww, and by the third or fourth song I had decided that I couldn't really discern one from the other. Also, I had noticed that the vocals seemed out of tune on the third song, so I decided to move on. We were stood outside the tent during the fourth song, and it now sounded like the guitar was in the wrong key, or the vocals had gone more out of tune.

Saille was listed as a Belgian, Symphonic Black Metal band, and I always note the word Symphonic. And this was one of those instances where I tend to tear my hair out (yes, I've still got some) as I liked the music that they played, but the vocals, well, it was another growler, screecher, screamer, call it what you will, but I would have liked to have heard the music with proper words that I could understand. **Ensiferum** were yet another Folk Metal band, once again from Finland. They weren't bad, but I had to smile at the song titles such as 'March Of War', 'Axe Of Judgement', 'Heathen Horde' and 'Treacherous Gods,' which proves that they are all of the same mind-set. Why can't they write songs like 'Dreaming Of Goldfish' or 'Croissants From Lidl'? The rather attractive female keyboard player obviously doesn't have a calming influence.

Back to the second stage to check out **Destrage**. They are described in the programme as Metal/Metal Core and elsewhere as Progressive Metal and for me they were my find of the festival. To some extent they defied description as nothing was sacred to them. They could be playing really heavy riffs with a solid beat, then the next instant they would be onto something really quiet and quirky that would have sounded Right in a 1970's detective series, then on to melodic with Rush type time changes before going back into heavy, crunching Metal. At times they reminded me of Dream Theater, while at others they sounded like Porcupine Tree. The two guitarists, Ralph Salati and Matteo Di Gioia were really good, but one (Matteo) was… different, probably having eaten three Weetabix, and the guy never stood still for a moment. I will definitely be checking these out again.

I have seen **Zakk Wylde** and **Black Label Society** quite a few times now over the years, so I know what to expect. No nonsense, Metal guitars, long hair, big beard, wall of sound and some chest beating. 'Whole Lotta Sabbath' rang out to start things off and then 'The Beginning… At Last' kicked things off properly. Unlike on his last tour, Wylde stayed totally Metal, with no quiet songs or any of the piano stuff. 'Bleed For Me', 'Suicide Messiah', 'My Dying Time' and 'Godspeed Hellbound' were all in the mix, and the now slightly over-long guitar solo came in the middle of 'Damn The Flood'. I noticed the drummer filming this from behind his kit, probably so he could show it to Wylde to highlight how long he actually plays for.

And so we were at the closing act of the festival. I had never seen a full **Rob Zombie** show before, partly because there was someone else I had to see on another stage at past festivals, but mainly because I thought he was a second rate Alice Cooper, and therefore didn't pay much attention. There is only one Cooper. Now there are similarities between them, and their subject matter does bounce in the same ball park but Zombie is definitely his own man. Seriously, this guy is fifty years old and runs around like a fourteen year old. Throwing moves, legs going everywhere, and not standing still for more than three seconds. I hated him after about three songs. What is he on? Once again, I was unfamiliar with the music, but was able to pick out the titles of 'Teenage Nosferatu Pussy', 'Superbeast', 'Pussy Liquor', 'Ging Gang Gong De Do Gong De Laga Raga' (how I will never know) and 'Meet The Creeper'. There was also a cover of James Brown's 'Get Up' and The Ramones 'Blitzkrieg Bop'. I liked the music and John 5 had more guitar changes than Cher had costumes.

So, that was our first Bloodstock, and I have to say I quite enjoyed it. The site is not so big that you get knackered running from one end to the other, the weather was great the whole time, and every band I saw seemed really happy when on stage. While I admit that a lot of the "music" was a bit too Metal for me, other tastes were catered for and, as the event gains more and more momentum, I would hope that, like Download, they will increase their menu and make things even tastier.

Andy Brailsford

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THE WELSH INTERNATIONAL CLASSIC ROCK FESTIVAL

Wales: Ebbw Vale, Hafod Y Dafal Farm – 23-24 July 2015

Saturday 23 July

After several days of rain and occasional showers for most of the morning we were glad we hadn't bothered with the low-key launch the previous night, but as we drive up the muddy road to the top of the mountain we're greeted by stewards carrying bales of hay. This didn't look good, but after parking with only a couple of slight skids, at least the rain held off for Merthyr Tydfil trio **Florence Black** to kick things off in highly effective fashion. Tristan, Jordan and Perry (this band don't seem to do surnames!) are sporting classic instruments like a Les Paul and a Thunderbird bass and make all the right moves for this Classic Rock loving crowd. Gritty and old-school, the no-nonsense approach on songs like 'Johnny' and 'Breaking Down' warm up the brave early arrivals on a day where warming up is seriously needed. (PA)

If FB were unfamiliar, Carnforth's **Massive Wagons** certainly weren't, in fact I'd seen them several times in the last few months and they're one of the liveliest acts on the circuit. Another no frills act who love to Rawk, the Wagons have a livewire front-man in Baz Mills who specializes in head-banging, rabble-rousing and even does a bit of singing, Carl Cochrane provides the rhythm guitar, Bowz Bouskill the bass, Alex Thistlethwaite is on drums and his brother Adam cranks out the guitar solos with his flying V, usually while standing on a monitor or the drum platform. They manage to get people out of their tents and wading to the front of the stage with their own songs like 'Rising Tides' and the wonderful 'Red Dress', but it's the covers of 'Highway Star' and 'Down Down' that get them dancing in the mud. (PA)

You have to love festivals when they throw up such oddities as a Welsh two-piece calling themselves **Henry's Funeral Shoe**, featuring brothers Aled and Brennig Clifford. They have a very tight, heavy Blues sound that must make any bass players watching worry that the game is finally up as if you close your eyes you'd never think this was just a guy on drums and a guy on guitar/vocals. Aled Clifford certainly makes the guitar his bitch throughout the solid set, even if his voice is no better than average, whilst brother Brennig Clifford is solid if unspectacular at the back. Although the set length was a little long, HFS (no, I don't know why they're called that) are a kick up the arse to anyone who thinks The White Stripes are clever. (AH)

An energy filled foursome who, by their own admission, "talk a lot of shit", **Trucker Diablo** hit the stage like a hammer (a big metal hammer, natch). Their songs are generally pretty fast, pretty heavy and a lot of fun, and to the uninitiated it must come as a bit of a shock when they turn out to be Irish, as their powerful, melodic riffage is straight out of the U.S. at times. This changes when they roll out a new track 'Girl In The Picture' which is a none too subtle but rather brilliant homage to Thin Lizzy, and a new depth is revealed with another new track 'Murder Ballad', whilst normal service is resumed with 'We Stand Strong', a proper Heavy Metal stomper of a track. Older tracks 'Drink Beer Destroy' and 'Juggernaut' still entertain in their Motorhead meets The Almighty way, but it's great to hear the newer material that shows that not only is the big truck still rolling, it's getting better and better. (AH)

As **The Treatment** hit the stage it seems all the younger people that have been hiding at the edges crawl out to raise their fists and yell at a band who have certainly improved since the last time I saw them. This may well be due to the addition of brand new vocalist (this is his debut show) Mitchell Emms, who has a superb voice and stage presence that reminds me of Erik Gronwall from H.e.a.t. For me, he gives TT a more Melodic Rock sound and I am actually looking forward to seeing how he will affect the band's recorded sound. They get the best response of the day so far (after all, everyone loves a bassist with a massive mohican) and look like a band who have received a massive shot of adrenaline. They finish off with the highly appropriate 'Shake The Mountain' and I get the feeling that I've finally seen TT as they were meant to be. (AH)

There comes time in a group's career when one line-up change too many surely takes them to the point where they're no longer the band you grew up with. For me that point was when **Nazareth** singer Dan McCafferty was no longer in good enough health to tour, but nonetheless original bassist Pete Agnew, the sole original member, brought in the much-travelled Carl Sentence alongside Agnew's son Lee on guitar and Jimmy Murrison on drums. Sentence doesn't have the natural rasp that McCafferty had (in fact I can't think of anyone with that much rasp!) but sings Naz classics like 'Razamanaz', 'Dream On', 'Hair Of The Dog' and 'Expect No Mercy' in his own style and doesn't try to copy his illustrious predecessor. You know what? It works! The band have a great natural and organic sound that suits this festival crowd to a tee and they happily sing along to several covers that the band had hits with themselves, including the Everly Brothers' 'Love Hurts' and the brilliant Joni Mitchell song 'This Flight Tonight'. (PA)

It's hard to imagine that Dave Meniketti has been fronting **Y&T** for forty odd years now, as when he and the band bounce on stage he looks great. Even better, he still sounds great and the large crowd that surrounds the stage area lap up the music. After a couple of opening songs, we are informed of the band's decision to play the classic 'Black Tiger' album from 1982, widely regarded as one of the best things they ever did, and rightfully so. As they obviously want to start with the title track, Meniketti announces that they'll be starting with side two, and we're off. Personally, I'm delighted when they get to 'Bar Room Boogie', one of my favourite Y&T tracks and still quite amusing after all this time and hundreds of listens. Another highlight is the raucous 'Open Fire', still a fantastic song and played with utter conviction by the whole band. It's great to hear all the older classics, with Meniketti often giving a little preamble to each, a mini history lesson. When they throw in 'Mean Streak' for example, we all know it's about a bitch, but now we know just which bitch it was! They seem to run

over their time a little, but no one gives a shit as they are playing so well and seem to be having such a good time. Closer 'Forever' is a perfect track to end a truly memorable performance from a band that still have the energy and gusto of old. (AH)

The weather didn't stop a large crowd staying put for headliners **UFO** who put on a performance worthy of their legacy. The classic British Rockers have their most stable line-up for many years, with bassist Rob DeLuca having replaced Pete Way seven years ago and guitarist Vinnie Moore now in his twelfth year alongside mainstays Phil Mogg, Andy Parker and Paul Raymond. Mixing the set-list up from the usual 'Strangers In The Night' track listing, the band get the first major surprise out of the way early as they open with the storming Paul Chapman-era Rocker 'We Belong To The Night', slipping in a few recent tunes from 'A Conspiracy Of Stars' and 'Seven Deadly' alongside the usual 'Lights Out' and 'Only You Can Rock Me'. Mogg is in fine form both vocally and as a particularly obtuse stand-up comedian, while Moore has made the guitar spot his own, putting something of himself into the solos on the hallowed 'Love To Love' and 'Rock Bottom' without too much dissent from the crowd. The other big surprise was the inclusion of 'Makin' Moves' before an inevitable ending of the aforementioned 'Rock Bottom', 'Doctor Doctor' and 'Shoot Shoot' were accompanied by a couple of thousand drunken air guitarists. (PA)

Sunday 24 July

After another night of heavy rain things began to look like they were unravelling. Firstly my fellow co-reviewer Alan Holloway sent me a text me to say that he and his mate were concerned about getting their car stuck in the mud so they' decided to head home, then my trusty seven seater narrowly made it to the top of the mountain to learn that opening band The Wild Lies had decided against making the trip too. However, the heroic **Skam** agreed to play a longer set for the couple of hundred people sheltering from the rain in the beer tent. With a sound that reminds me of the Retro Rock of The Answer, the Leicester three-piece rip through their own songs like the powerful 'No Lies' and 'Massacre' with all the enthusiasm of a band who look happy to be playing anywhere. Steve Hill is an engaging singer and guitar player and the bass-driven 'Rivers' may well be their best song, they should, however, stay well

away from AC/DC covers. (PA)

With apologies to reformed Northern Irish Rockers **No Hot Ashes**, we spent most of their set sitting in the car as it was the only dry place to eat a meal and still hear the band clearly. The drizzle had turned into a downpour and anywhere close to the stage was a mud-bath, but NHA have a decent vocalist in Eamon Nancarrow and their songs are drenched in harmonies of both the vocal and guitar kind, along with a series of catchy choruses. At some point I look forward to being able to see them as well as hear them, preferably in more comfortable surroundings. (PA)

Is there a more nonchalant Rock star than Little Angels guitarist Bruce Dickinson? His new Classic Rock band **Colour Of Noise** play a blinder here, bringing people out in the rain to dance in the mud to their catchy Blues Rock. Only energetic front-man Matt Mitchell (Furyon) looks like he's in a Rock band, covering every inch of the stage and getting the crowd involved, even though they've never heard most of these songs before, and with CON it's all about the songs. 'You Only Call Me..' is a big, confident Rocker with a great groove, whilst the likes of 'Drive It Like You Stole It' and 'Medicine Man' definitely have something about them that hooks people in at first listen. Some have obviously seen the video to 'Head On' because they even sing along, whilst before and after the killer closer 'Hit Rock Bottom' chants of "Bruce! Bruce!" spontaneously start up, acknowledged by the coolest man in Rock with a barely discernible nod of the head and a wave as they leave the stage having made a few new fans. (PA)

If CON were an unknown quantity, the mighty **FM** were familiar to just about everybody here, although I'm amazed they're so low down the bill. Kicking off with the brand new 'Digging Up The Dirt', the band use their hour wisely with a non-stop celebration of their most popular songs, from 'Indiscreet' classics 'I Belong To The Night', 'Other Side Of Midnight' and 'That Girl' to the ballad 'Closer To Heaven', the chunky 'Wildside', the non-album single 'Let Love Be The Leader' and a 'Tough It Out' selection that includes the title track and a closing salvo of 'Don't Stop' and 'Bad Luck'. You don't really need me to tell you that Steve Overland was in fine voice because when is he not? The guys were having a blast and grin at the sea of umbrellas and anoraks (real ones!), who in turn applaud the band for a fine set in ludicrous conditions. (PA)

Someone who doesn't really care about the bad weather is German Metal Queen **Doro**, who ignores the rain and steps out onto the walkway, staying there for virtually the whole set until she was wetter than most of those watching. Almost her whole set was made up from her Warlock days, including 'Touch Of Evil', 'Burning The Witches' and her sing-along anthem 'All We Are', but solo songs 'Raise Your Fist In The Air' and 'Revenge' get an airing as well as a spirited version of Judas Priest's 'Breaking The Law'. As well as possessing that air-raid siren of a voice, Doro is highly thought of because she's the real deal, and a genuinely nice person to boot. Her place on any festival bill is a no-brainer. (PA)

Another band who also give their all in these situations is **Tyketto**, the New Yorkers who are now spread all over the globe and have Thunder's Chris Childs standing in for Jimi Kennedy on this European jaunt. The recent 'Dig In Deep' album has given them a chance to freshen up the set-list, none more so than here where they play 'Love To Love', 'Dig In Deep' and 'Sound Off', which all fit in alongside the classics from their two major label releases, and most surprisingly serve up 'Let It Go', to my knowledge the first time Danny Vaughn has ever sung this song. The crowd go wild to 'Burning Down Inside', 'Rescue Me' and 'Wings', as well as the acoustic-led numbers 'Catch My Fall', 'Standing Alone' and the re-introduced 'Write Your Name In The Sky'. Guitarist Chris Green has now cemented his place in the band and plays like a man possessed, while Michael Clayton Arbeeny hammers his drums with staggering force and keyboardist Ged Rylands adds tasteful keyboards and backing vocals to a band who sound as good as they ever did, if not better. It speaks volumes how much still doing this means to the band as Vaughn's voice cracks when he's thanking the audience, there's very little joy in the music world as big as encore 'Forever Young', even in the pouring rain. (PA)

You can say what you like about Twisted Sister front-man **Dee Snider**, but even when he isn't

mouthing off about people and things that shouldn't really concern him, there's no denying that he's the archetypal Rock front-man. Clad all in white, Snider starts his headline set with Sister's 'You Can't Stop Rock 'N' Roll' and Widowmaker's 'Emaheevul' before going into "fanboy" mode for AC/DC's 'Highway To Hell'. Never keeping still for a minute, "motor-mouth" is in fine form here, ripping out a few more TS classics like 'We're Not Gonna Take It', 'The Kids Are Back' and 'Burn In Hell' amongst other selections from his career within and without the legendary Rockers. However, a guitar solo and then a drum solo send people heading for the exits as the rain, and subsequent mud, are showing no signs of abating. (PA)

Despite the weather and the uncomfortable conditions, the musical entertainment has been beyond reproach, but I guess the experience might make some people think again about the multiple choices they have for festivals in 2016. A big thank you is due to the Steelhouse team for going above and beyond the call of duty and keeping things running, and a personal thanks go to lovely Planetmosh duo Mark and Carolyn and some random strangers for pushing our hopelessly stuck car out of the mud. (PA)

Phil Ashcroft (PA) & Alan Holloway (AH)

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Germany: Loreley – 07-08 August 2015

Two years ago the HiRock Festival shook the middle Rhine valley, where the mystic Lorelei Rock overlooking St Goarshausen, is located. In August, Germany's most beautiful concert venue called again and thousands of music-lovers flocked to that legendary place to become part of Germany's newest Rock and Metal feast, Rockfels.

For me, getting to the venue on Friday 07 August (a tropically hot summer day) was a two-hour drive (without AC!) to the most memorable place I've ever visited. If you ever have the chance to go there, do so! I got over the river Rhine via the ferry and up to the venue, which is located in the mountains where the first thing that caught my eyes were the hundreds of queuing people, holding tickets in their hands. Later on I found out that all tickets had to be exchanged against festival wristbands but still all tickets had to be scanned...organizational overkill! Then, when I tried to get my press-pass I found myself waiting for almost forty minutes (and missed **Serious Black** and half of **Axxis**.) because the press accreditation list obviously got lost. However, the very young girls at the counter tried their best and when I eventually received my press package I was happily surprised; a great-looking lanyard, a rain-poncho (surely no need for that this weekend), a festival guide, a map, schedule and a couple of drink-vouchers. This was much more impressive...

So, I was only able to listen to **Serious Black** from outside: a band I had been really looking forward to seeing. From what I heard, the group delivered a great start for the festival. Singer Urban Breed and his fellas didn't mind the heat and Rocked their hearts out and powerfully presented songs including 'I Seek No Other Life', 'Temple Of The Sun', 'Older And Wiser' and 'Sealing My Fate'.

Second on the list, **Axxis**; a guarantee for fun, quality and tornado-like movements by singer Bernhard Weiss all the way through the set. I got in during their fourth song and therefore missed the opportunity to take pictures. So I just enjoyed the show and inhaled the mood of the festival... I have no idea how the band managed to give more than one hundred percent that day. Rob Schomaker played like a God while having fun with the photographers and let the soil vibrate with his extremely fat bass-sound. Weiss jumped and whirled all over the stage like a high-voltage-tornado while Axxis' newest member, six-string maestro Stefan Weber, just happily smiled his way through the set, convincing with impressive light-fingeredness. The entire band showed limitless team spirit on stage, their performance stronger than ever. Old classics like 'Living In A World', 'Little Look Back' or 'Little War' mixed with more modern tracks like 'Heavy Rain', pounding 'Tales Of Glory Island' or 'Hall Of Fame' emerged in a perfectly presented set. After thirty years, Axxis still gave everything they've got for their fans. Finishing with 'Kingdom Of The Night', it was a fitting climax to a great set.

It was either Axxis' energy or the gleaming fireball up in the sky that killed one of the amps and it took the crew about thirty minutes to replace the broken device. If **Dragonforce** could play any faster than they already do, they would have been able to make up for the loss of time. But instead their set is cut down to four songs. The Brits took the cutback with fortitude. Herman Li and Sam Totman showed off their typically frenetic guitar work and finger-stunts: it was quite a miracle their fret-boards weren't set on fire that day during the four songs comprising 'Fury And The Storm', 'Three Hammers', 'Symphony Of The Night' and 'Through The Fire And The Flames'. The two fastest guitarists I've ever seen fooled around on stage while bass-monster Fred Leclerq covered all corners of the stage and banged his head like there was no tomorrow. Gee Anzalone was impressive as the new animal behind the shooting gallery too! Altogether a great show with a good mix and vocal sound. Dragonforce sound a lot more convincing live than they do on record.

Next act, the **Red Hot Chilli Pipers** (yes, you read that correctly!) filled my heart with horror in the run-up to the festival. I don't really need to hear Classic Rock songs on bagpipes... so I took the chance to get a desperately-needed drink without losing sight with the stage. The Scots definitely controlled the crowd: sudatory sit-down-jump-up-raise-your-glass-games are joyfully played along by the by now half undressed audience. Songs like 'Smoke On The Water', 'We Will Rock You', 'Thunderstruck' or 'Gimme All Your Lovin'' got "kilt". Really! Their performance might be a nice show-act by good musicians with fun choreography and great outfits but in that line-up it all appeared a bit like a joke. I'm not too sad the Pipers also had to cut back their set because the screaming sound of bagpipes "interpreting" some of the world's most amazing Rock songs sent unpleasant shivers down my spine. Next please...

However, before the fantastic, Danish Melodic Rock formation **Pretty Maids** would conquer the stage, I took a look around. Approximately half of the 4,000 people present were still hiding in the cooling shade of the trees on top of the hill since every other corner of the venue gets mercilessly struck by intense, glaring sunlight. So, at about 6:30 Ronnie Atkins, Ken Hammer, Rene Shades, Morten Sandager and Allan Tschicaja filled the hot air with their booming sound and intoxicating mix of hymns and masterpieces. Good old killer songs like 'Mother Of All Lies', 'Red, Hot And Heavy', 'Rodeo' and 'Back To Back' were mixed with the more recent 'Nuclear Boomerang', 'Pandemonium' and 'Little Drops Of Heaven'. Pink Floyd's 'Another Brick In The Wall' served as a brilliant intro for 'I.N.V.U.'. Then the crowd enthusiastically joined in with encore 'Future World' and it became clear to me that the goosebumps-creating 60 minutes of Pretty Maids set would forever remain in my memory. The legendary Scandinavians were pitch perfect in every sense and it was somewhat disappointing that the venue wasn't as packed as it should have been for them.

It's slowly getting dark and the earth starts to breathe again after we had passed the 40°C mark during the day. At 8:00 Swiss monster Rockers **Gotthard** let their magic commence. A massive, silver Cadillac-front that covered Hena Habegger's drum-riser, along with the numerous Marshall amps with effectively-added "bullet-holes" made the stage look

incredible. 'Bang!', the title-track from their latest record, resounded from the PA and once again I'm extremely impressed by the perfectly balanced sound (and had been during the entire day). The Gotthard guys seem to have obviously finally overcome the tragic loss of former lead singer Steve Lee, top-class vocalist Nic Maeder is nothing but smiles. Their performance was one huge party: wonderful audience interaction accompanying the exceedingly likeable bunch of Hard Rockers. Leo Leoni looked in better shape than ever, playing his guitar in every possible position without losing grip once, while Marc Lynn added vitality to the big-picture with a permanent smile and calming influence contrasting with the enormous power of Habegger. Freddy Scherer, second guitar-God here, Leoni and Maeder used the catwalk in the most persuasive manner; together, alone but always as friends. Guest-musician Ernesto Ghezzi was probably the most energetic keyboarder you can imagine. It's pure joy watching them... Not to mention that their set was a massive feast for the ears, including 'Sister Moon', 'Master Of Illusion', 'Hush', 'Lift 'U Up', 'Ride On' and 'Remember It's Me'. No matter from which era, no matter what kind of song, the band gave everything and received an ecstatic response in return. For 'Starlight' about 20-25 fans were invited to join the six-piece on stage which posed problems for the security guys for a moment! One of Gotthard's monster hits 'Anytime, Anywhere' ends their stage-time and I seriously wondered who was actually headlining... This was 70 minutes that could have lasted forever. An absolutely epic performance....

The light show was on for **Hammerfall**, darkness having swallowed the heat of the day. I can't deny, I'm not the biggest Hammerfall fan, mainly because most of their albums have sounded rather "samey" to me. However, the Swedish band gave the stage their very personal look in style of their most recent release '(r)Evolution'. Album opener 'Hector's Hymn' blasted from the speakers to get matters underway and a very well-rehearsed band is show a lot of movement, interaction and high energy levels. However, something seemed to be wrong with the microphone since singer Joacim Cans ran back to the stage crew again and again during the first three songs and appeared to be somewhat pissed off by something! Thus it was only after 'Any Means Necessary' and 'Renegade', that 'B.Y.H.' was the first song the entire band was able to fire at the audience with full-force. Oscar Dronjak jumped and whirled himself and his Flying V all over the stage like a maniac, posed for pictures and channeled his sophisticated guitar-skills to the vibrating amps. Together with the others, Pontus Norgren, David Wallin and Frederik Larsson, the band certainly created a harmonious impression. They sought contact with the fans by coming to the very front of the stage again and again – highly appreciated

by the sweaty mob we had become during the day! 'Blood Bound', 'Live Life Loud', '400 Meter Medley', 'Threshold' and 'Last Man Standing' are among the well-chosen tracks for this appearance. At least one track from each album was played, including their obligatory band-hymn 'Let The Hammer Fall'. The two tracks in the encore, 'Bushido' and absolutely gigantic 'Hearts On Fire' capped off a truly great show. Even though it is unlikely I will become a huge fan of this Scandinavian Power Metal institution, I was absolutely amazed by their performance.

Day one of Rockfels 2015 ended with a weather-warning for the campers: heavy thunderstorms and lightening could strike during the night... I was obviously not the only one thinking "Rain would be awesome now...." but I kept my fingers crossed for those who didn't have solid walls around them for the next few hours. Luckily the thunderstorms only turned out to be a couple of lightning flashes but they brought some clouds to protect us all from that damn hot sun up there for the following day of the Festival.

Day two began the same way the first day ended; with an announcement from the organizer. **Mantar**, a Doom-Metal and Punk band from Hamburg, had cancelled their appearance at short notice. Surprisingly this caused quite some elation amongst the Rockers present... Even more happiness was garnered as **Beyond The Black** were announced to play longer instead. What a good start into the day! The Symphonic Metal band from southern Germany were new to me and was absolutely stunned from the first moment when very young and delicate-looking lead-singer Jennifer Haben opened her mouth: her very "un-girly" timbre sending a wake-up call through the air. All around me, I saw positively surprised faces and heard murmuring about the band's quality. Their sound is massive and brilliant (thumbs up for the sound engineers once again) and each members' musical abilities were outstanding. I also adored the darker and heavier touches some of their songs contained. Nils Lesser and Christopher Hummels showed marvellous skill on their six-strings while the rest of the band created a perfectly balanced wall of sound. 'In The Shadows', 'When Angels Fall', their album's title-track 'Songs Of Love And Death' and an unbelievable cover of Motörhead's 'Love Me Forever' sent shivers of delight down my spine. My deepest respect for this through-and-through top-class band and performance, and certainly a band to look out for in the future.

Brainstorm, another German Power Metal band, poured more oil onto the bonfire of high-quality Rock and Metal. Another band I knew very little about beforehand, I found myself intensively digging into their material after the festival. The five guys performed solid and refreshingly-written Power Metal. Front-man Andy B. Franck and his friends delivered a genius show with a lot of funny introductions. 'Worlds Are Coming Through', 'Firesoul', 'Fire Walk With Me', 'Falling Spiral Down' and my personal favourites 'Shiver', 'Shiva's Tears' and the encore number 'How Do You Feel' catapulted Brainstorm into the center of everybody's attention. The Rockfels had awakened and was ready to jump and celebrate all day long.

Pink Cream 69 then revealed a more than mind-blowing treasure chest of old and new songs in front of about 6,000 head-banging music-lovers. Singer David Readman is still at the peak of his vocal prowess and conquered every centimeter of the stage like a lunatic. Bass player Dennis Ward and guitarist Uwe Reitenauer were a bit more static, leaving more space for Readman! Guitarist Alfred Koffler shined with incredible solos and Chris Schmidt mistreated his drums and cymbals with enormous power. The band constantly kicked ass with 'Keep Your Eye On The Twisted', 'Hell's Gone Crazy', 'Talk To The Moon', 'Do You Like It Like That', 'Welcome The Night' or 'Lost In Illusion' and didn't seem to wane at any point during their set. Another highly impressive performance from a long-established band!

The moment Finnish monster Rockers **Lordi** came up on stage, the sky turned dark. But with their almighty Shock-Rock and their stunning costumes, they scared the clouds away! Tomi "Mr. Lordi" Putaansuu spreads his enormous bat wings and immediately the crowd is under his spell. "Es ist scheiße heiß!" ("It's fuckin' hot!"), he grunts in devilish voice; "What if they would have had to play Friday?" I thought. Their killer-performance started with 'Nailed By The Hammer Of Frankenstein' and continued with a brilliantly-sounding set of 'Hard Rock Hallelujah', 'Deadache', 'Blood Red Sandman', 'It Snows In Hell' and also Alice Cooper's 'He's Back'. The show ended in a lyrical massacre, comprising 'Who's Your Daddy' (of course with the scary baby doll shooting confetti out of her mouth...) and 'Would You Love A Monsterman'. The show seemed to end way too soon. It was pure joy listening and watching them... should I be alarmed?!

I wasn't really looking forward to seeing **U.D.O.** since I normally can't stand Dirkschneider's voice but the band's incredible performance might change my mind! The German Rock institution announced beforehand that after their tour, all Accept songs would be banned from their concerts so luckily I had the chance to hear them live once again. After the intro and a very loud 'The German Tank Is Back' I turned my head to the crowd and my heart skipped a beat: where had all those people come from all of a sudden? The venue was packed, I mean, REALLY packed and the entire mob looked like they were on happy pills! What energy! Dirkschneider, Wienhold, Smirnov and Heikkinen totally got the crowd under their spell and looked to be having genuine fun on stage; probably the happiest band of the entire festival. U.D.O. also decided to share a best of mix of songs and take the stage with brute force and sound: the last remnants of confetti blown off the stage. 'King Of Mean', 'Decadent' and frenetically celebrated 'Metal Machine' came across just as powerful as Accept classics like 'Metal Heart' and 'Balls To The Wall' when even Mr. Lordi appears again to support the massively strong performance of the German Metal legends. I revoke everything I had said about U.D.O. before. THIS was stunning!

Unfortunately **Saxon** didn't manage to keep this level up. The band's currently on their 35th Anniversary

tour and I expected an epic performance but instead singer Peter "Biff" Byford appeared to be in a really bad mood. Technical issues with the mic certainly doesn't help in such a situation, but it was not just him. Even guitarist Doug Scarratt didn't seem to enjoy himself at all. Apart from Tim "Nibbs" Carter who works his bass undeviatingly with a smile, the entire band performance came across as really tense and barely showed any love for what they do. Musically the set is well-chosen and played, 'Power And The Glory', 'Princess Of The Night', 'Crusader', 'Wheels Of Steel', 'Battering Ram' (from the imminent album of the same name) and the encore 'Denim And Leather' didn't leave me cold but there was no spark to set the audience on fire here. Very sad!

Today's headliner band was **Helloween**. 'Walls Of Jericho' introduced their fantastic performance in front of an impressive stage construction, picking out the central theme of their newest album 'My God Given Right' with that enormous head of the Statue Of Liberty and impressively printed back-drops, stunningly illuminated. The guys from Hamburg immediately revived the party. Everybody at the festival went wild, while Andi Deris and Markus Grosskopf used the size of the stage at its full capacity; these guys could probably make a football-field look too small! With incredible vigour, they animated the crowd to sing along and raise their hands while they delivered a one-of-a-kind headliner show. Whoever controlled the lightshow was a God as well, I'd like to mention here, perfectly matching colouring and effects throughout the set. Songs including 'Eagle Fly Free', 'Steel Tomorrow', 'Straight Out Of Hell', 'If I Could Fly', 'Power' along with two of the most recently produced tracks, the ultra-catchy 'My God-Given Right' and brilliant 'Lost In America', came across as indisputable master of goose-bump creating masterpieces. 'Keeper Of The Seven Keys' (which is fervently sung along by all attendees), 'Future World' and 'I Want Out' closed a magnificent performance. Helloween were a most worthy headline – and closing act for Rockfels 2015.

Overall, my conclusions about the Festival were extremely positive. The organisation was great (apart from some misinformed members of the staff, the ticket/accreditation chaos at the beginning). The security people were helpful and friendly, food and drinks were of a good quality and mostly reasonably priced (€3 for water is a BIT pricey though!).

The next Rockfels is already planned for June 10th and 11th 2016 (definitely make a note of this!). Ulrich Lautenschläger (organiser and head of Rockfels) and his crew deserve a massive thank you for their fantastic work and efforts. This, my friends, was absolutely outstanding! Come and join us all next year at a fabulous location above the beautiful river Rhine.

Julia Braun

Martin Barre

'Back to Steel' celebrates Martin Barre's 50th year as a musician. His guitar work with Jethro Tull is legendary and Martin is celebrated as one of Rocks most influential guitarists. This his sixth solo release, looks to be his most accomplished to date, featuring a wonderful mixture of Blues Rock, acoustic and contemporary music. Martin talks to Fireworks' Ray Paul about his new release, touring plans and the musicians featured on 'Back To Steel'.

Where does the title 'Back to Steel' come from? It almost sounds like a Judas Priest title.

It is a reference to electric guitars and their steel strings, many of which have passed under my fingers with great satisfaction. It is the love and respect for the pure approach to playing and the fascination of the combination of wood and steel to produce such diverse music around the world.

It really sounds like you have let loose as a guitar player on this release Martin.

Yes! I am a free man at last – that's a joke! My role in Jethro Tull was various approaches to band playing; sometimes soloing and being at the front, other times supporting the other musicians and even sometimes not playing in certain sections of music. These three factors are all paramount in learning how to be a better player and band member. I've taken the things I have learned and developed them with my own band, but of course, get a lot more space for my guitar playing!!

I always enjoy your reinterpretation of Tull songs, my favourite being 'Pussy Willow' from 'Away With Words', how did you approach 'Skating Away'?

I am not a fan of reproducing songs verbatim, so I like to put my own "brand" on everything we do. Hopefully the song remains the same but it has my personality on top. I love arranging music. It would be really interesting to give half a dozen musicians the same song to arrange and see what happens.

My personnel favourite song on 'Back To Steel' is 'Moment of Madness'. Dan really nails the vocal and your guitar work is terrific, can you tell me something about this song?

This song grew from a riff that got edited out of the final arrangement! The other parts that developed took it in a darker direction, which we all liked. I also had to re-write the lyrics as the theme of the song changed; but it is great fun to play live and Dan, as you say, sings it perfectly.

I enjoyed the beautiful vocals on 'You And I', what can you tell us about the singers?

The singers are Alex Hart and Elani Andrea, who come from nearby Plymouth. They have their own bands playing a mix from Folk to Reggae and Punk. They worked so well together that I wanted them to be heard up front on the album. 'You and I' is very different from the other tracks, so I think the vocals work great.

If you could have any guest singer n one of your albums who would it be?

I love great singers and envy their talent so much. My early attempts at vocals are suitably lost in time. From Stevie Winwood to Don Henley, there are so many but I'll choose Paul Carrack.

It really seems you have created a diverse collection of songs to appeal to all music fans, was this intentional?

It is never my intention to go on various tangents, musically, but I always seem to do it! I have never had a map of directions and just like to pick up an instrument and write, wherever that takes me. One ingredient might be the choice of instrument, sometimes electric guitar but also bouzouki, mandolin and even banjo!

For anyone not familiar with your band can you tell us a little something about them?

Dan Crisp is the vocalist and plays guitar in the band. I have known Dan for nearly eight years, so we have a lot of understanding within the music. He has developed so much in the last few years as a singer and performer and brings a huge input into the line-up. George Lindsay plays drums; we met at a local studio where he had played on a lot of sessions. His reputation was formidable and as soon as we played together I knew why. He is a rock and the strong foundation we build on and a great person to have around. Alan Thomson joined the band at the beginning of 2015 through a recommendation by Dave Pegg of Fairport Convention. Dave is the sort of person you want in your band, with no equals, until we met Alan. He is an awesome player and has an enormous knowledge of music. Together with guest vocalists Alex Hart and Becca Langsford on most gigs, they are the best band I have ever played with and a pleasure to be around.

How far back did you begin song writing for this album, and was it hard to get it down to fifteen songs?

I started at the beginning of the year, writing the music as I travelled. Some songs in Mississippi, some in Thailand and the rest in Devon! I had no pressure with time, so I was very focused on getting a good collection of ideas. Back in the studio I worked through them, constantly changing and, hopefully, improving on them. The lyrics came last and I found that part the hardest. In the final mix I only took out about two to three minutes of music; I was very happy with the rest.

Most critics will claim 'Aqualung' and 'Thick As A Brick' are the definitive Tull albums. Personally 'Broadsword', 'Songs From The Wood' and 'Crest Of A Knave' are my favourites. I wondered what are your stand out albums ?

Very often the albums that were the most fun to make suffered with a loss of direction and sometimes weren't favourably received. I loved recording 'Benefit', 'Under Wraps' and 'Crest Of A Knave' the most.

Is it a fine line when choosing a set list, and not having to rely to much on the Tull catalogue?

I always keep a sensible balance. A drop of Tull, a drop of Blues mixed with a jug of originals is the usual outcome. I want the live set to be fresh for the band and the audience and luckily we have equal fun with all these elements.

Having witnessed some of your live shows, it really looks like you are having a wonderful time Martin. Do you still get the same thrill as when you first started performing?

I work a lot harder on stage in my own band and the rewards are huge. I really enjoy playing a lot of guitar and even like to chat as well. The thrill has always been there but the ingredients have changed. The adrenalin comes more from the anticipation now, rather than nerves.

Finally can we expect a more extensive tour to promote 'Back To Steel'?

Next year is a very important one for the band. We will visit the USA a couple of times and play big tours in Europe and, of course, the UK. I want to play all the territories that Tull played over the years, as I have such great memories of them all.

Don't call it a "super-group", this new Rock band of Leif Edlind and Marcus Jidell, has influences like Blue Öyster Cult and Jethro Tull well to the fore; their new album is undeniably theatrical and might even turn some people off. Surely the majority will be delighted though. Singer Jennie-Anne Smith hopes so as she talks to Steve Swift.

"Our musical background and preferences are not theatrical but the outcome of our present work is certainly dynamic and emotional so I can understand that you relate to a theatrical basis."

Oh it is, having a sweep which is hard to beat; a way in for fans, a door in the rabbit hole perhaps. She immediately talks about the importance of the fans.

"Our main focus through this process has been to write, produce and make music that we like ourselves. I believe that being as honest and authentic about your music as you can will affect the outcome and will immediately be obvious to your audience and followers."

And now to that thorny issue; genres. Difficult to categorise - are they Power, Goth, Vaudeville - linking to one will make careers easier to traverse, won't it? Nah.

"It seems important for some to make genre classifications but I don't think it is. A good song is a good song, a singer that you like is a singer that you like, either you feel something when you listen or you don't, as simple as that.

"Our music contains elements of Rock, Hard Rock, Jazz and Blues combined and brought together in quite poetic and sophisticated way..."

A rather good description of this challenging and sumptuous music, which sounds like a magnum opus, accessible though it is. That accessibility is due to their recent listening, perhaps...

"Before starting the recording process of 'Girl With The Raven Mask' we had a lot of conversations concerning common musical preferences and sound. Neil Young, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Mountain to name a few examples who have served as great inspiration for this album. I do really like 'Pearls and Coffins' (from the new album), really like how the arrangement turned out - hope you'll like it too!"

Such impressive music can often cause ructions, anger and slapping contests in the studio. It does sound like a whole band affair, with a real attempt to keep everyone together.

"I have been so much more involved in the recording process this time - which you can probably hear on listening to the album. I guess I really consider myself being a musician rather than only a singer, I knew that I just had to contribute more to be able to continue.

"Leif writes the song, basic chords and topline. Leif and Marcus start out recording rough demos in Marcus' studio Deep Well in Stockholm and after that me and Marcus have been working with arrangements, instrumentation and sounds before sending the songs to the Carl and Lars. The second part of the process has been rehearsing the songs together in the studio before recording. We all wanted the sound to be as organic as possible, a basic live feeling with no editing, no melodyne and no drum triggers.

"Marcus Jidell is main producer of the album, we have all been given the creative freedom to contribute and I think that Marcus has really done a great job bringing the best out of every one of us.

And one of the surprising and wonderful moments in the music is the appearance of keys, adding warmth and grandiose flashes.

"Carl Westholm plays the organ, piano, Fender Rhodes and Theremin and his contributions have been given a lot more light on this album. He's a great musician and I think he has, just as myself, explored some new musical ground on this record.

"The album holds a fine balance between light and shadow that I really like - we feel happy about how our music has developed through the process with 'Girl With The Raven Mask'."

And now for pressure... The press release states that this album is close to perfection. It's very good, but...

"We just wanted to make music and record an album that we could really enjoy ourselves, if someone thinks it's close to perfection I'm really happy about that.

"As mentioned earlier, to have creative freedom, being able to grow and develop is our main focus. If continuing to work with music stays fulfilling I'm sure a lot of new listeners will experience the same thing."

Nicely swerved! Avatarium will be touring with The Vintage Caravan - seems like a great package of the raucous and the smoothly noisy. She is jazzed but a little concerned.

"I think it's going to be a great tour package and we are sooo looking forward to share our new album with as many people in the UK as possible!

"Meeting the audience - and especially the Hard Rock audience, is quite emotional for me. We do use a quite a big paintbrush, to say the least. Our music contains a lot of dynamics, scenery changes and temperament, to connect with the audience and to go through all of those emotions it holds together, is truly powerful.

"We will be doing a show at Camden Underworld in London on the 22nd of October so make sure you'll get tickets!"

Nice sales pitch! Do make sure though, this will either work remarkably well or be a bit of a disaster as both kinds of music pull in their own direction. Jennie-Anne finishes on a lovely touch.

"I would just like to thank all of our old and new listeners for being so very passionate about music! I've met so much support, tolerance, a sense of being included and love - one can just hope that these peaceful powers spreads to other parts of our common cultures."

This album is special. 'The Girl With The Raven Mask' will caress you, kiss you gently, then slap you and present a puzzle with a cocked head and engaging smile. It is that good. Do seek it out.

Nad Sylvan

To those of us who are Prog fans Nad Sylvan (aka Hugh Erik Stewart) will be known as the guy with a very similar voice to Peter Gabriel and who has recorded albums with Unifaun, Agents of Mercy and most recently has been a member of Steve Hackett's touring band in support of his 'Genesis: Revisited' releases. However, in the down time between Hackett tours, Sylvan has recorded his third solo album, 'Courting the Widow' (reviewed elsewhere in this issue), and splendid it is too. Gary Marshall spoke with the man in question to find out more.

With this release Sylvan has taken the major leap of becoming a full-time musician, I wondered if this was a difficult decision and what had proved the turning point? It seems the decision may not have been entirely his own.

"It was a matter of soul survival, I suppose. When I was offered to do another world tour with Steve, I simply couldn't turn it down and although the company I've worked for over the last sixteen years had very graciously given me lots of leave to do the 'Genesis: Revisited' tours, I guess they had to draw a line somewhere. The thought of it is a little scary, but with the new world tour coming up which also coincided with a record deal for myself it was actually an easy transition."

It transpires that his 'day' job was anything but, it was as a night Supervisor at what sounds remarkably like a Call Centre. Hardly Rock 'n' Roll but something of a reality for most modern musicians.

Whilst, on the face of it it's not a concept album, there does appear to be an underlying theme that connects the songs. I asked Sylvan to explain, at which point he pulls me up on my assumption, very politely.

"I think it is a concept album in some ways, but in other ways maybe not. I'm leaving it to the listener to decide. The theme is death and the widow is the symbol for that, The Vampirate (which is how Sylvan refers to himself if you look at his website) is your guide and his ship represents the vehicle for the songs. The inspiration is that I lost my mother to cancer 6 years ago just when I was writing the title track. I also lost my best friend of 40 years and a few other friends as well. They went too early and I miss them. My first two relationships in the 80s went the same way. It's been a little tough for me."

Most of us know him as a singer and front-man but few would be aware of his ability on both keyboards and guitar. On this album he's really demonstrated those skills; had he played either in any other bands before?

"I was playing keyboards and doing lead vocals in my various bands between 1976 and 1983. As for the guitar, I really need to practice more before I dare to play onstage, but I'm a pretty good keyboard player, I think."

The comment regarding guitar seems somewhat understated when I understood it to be the case that Sylvan asked Steve Hackett to play a solo on one track but ended up leaving in some of his own 'guide' guitar lines in a kind of duel. Was that right?

"That's actually true. It's on the album's last track, 'Long Slow Crash Landing'. I'm slightly to the left, while Steve is to the right in the mix. When I started listening back I thought some of my playing was a little more subtle and decided to use that and combine it with Steve's more powerful playing. I'm really proud of that and I think it turned out very well." I for one couldn't agree more; the combination works so well and is a very fitting conclusion to the album.

As seems to be the way these days, certainly in the Prog genre, there is a fine array of guest musicians to play on the album. How did he go about choosing who was right for a particular track?

"Educated guessing I would say," responds Nad. "I just heard in my head who would be the best fit for each part. Nick Beggs was there from the word go, and it was nice that the others sort of submitted their interest in the album when they had heard what was going on. I suspect the biggest surprise for most people would be the presence of Doane Perry. I have become very close to Doane on a personal level and he approached me after seeing one of Steve's shows in the US. He is a great guy and a really wonderful musician."

Sylvan also produced the album and I confess to him that I am extremely impressed with the results not least because I love the clarity and separation he's achieved. I wondered if this was his first attempt at that role.

"No, it's not my first attempt. I produced both my previous solo albums as well as the Unifaun album." This is something I should have recalled as back in the day I reviewed that very album too. Sylvan continues, "The latter was in collaboration with Bonamici but I solely did the mixing in for this album in my home studio."

Being a big fan of strong bass lines in my Prog, I marvel at how good these are on the album; my assumption being that it's a combination of Nick Beggs on the Chapman Stick, Jonas Reingold on traditional bass and good old bass pedals. I ask Sylvan if it was a conscious effort on his behalf to have the bass so dynamic.

"I'm not really sure if Nick uses the Stick at all to be honest, maybe he does. I never bothered to ask and of course, as is the way now, he did his parts at home and sent me the files, so I wasn't there when he played. The bass pedals are actually me, and yes, I am very bass conscious. I wrote all the bass lines that the guys play. I'm very much a bass player in my head, but unfortunately not very skilled with the fingers to be able to get the same results. Your reaction tells me I achieved what I was after."

Sylvan wrote all the songs himself, a couple of which were apparently presented to Roine Stolt for Agents of Mercy but didn't make the cut.

"Roine didn't think they fitted into the current style we were into at the time, so naturally I decided to keep them to myself which has turned out to be a good decision, I think."

By the time this interview is published Sylvan will be well into another extensive world tour with Steve Hackett where he will be singing some really old and rarely heard Genesis tracks; but does he have anything planned for after that? Can we expect a Nad Sylvan tour any time soon?

"I plan to start writing new stuff while we're on the road and carry on when I return home in December, this will be for a follow up album which I think has to be the next step. It's too early to talk about a tour; let's see what next year brings and how things are developing."

Norway's finest, Leaves' Eyes, return with their new CD 'King Of Kings'. Based on old Norse Sagas about the first King of Norway, Harald Fairhair, the band have used every trick in the book to make this one of the best Symphonic Metal albums of its kind. Ian Johnson talks with the band's resident History Professor and singer Liv Kristine about the new album.

'King Of Kings' is a concept piece based on a real person Harald Fairhair, who was the first King of Norway from 872-930 AD. What can you tell us about him and what about him inspired you and the band to write a whole album about his exploits?

Absolutely correct, the concept of this album is based on Harald "Fairhair" Hårfagre's life and a special event, in the 9th century, of Norway's history. The story of our album, 'King Of Kings', centres around the Battle of Hafrsfjord and Harald Fairhair's siege. Hafrsfjord was a decisive battle, and the fame of Harald's victory was henceforward numbered among the dearest themes of the skald and chronicler in the Middle Ages. The battle paved the way for Harald to gain control over most of the western coast of Norway and rightly call himself king of the country. He placed a Jarl (Earl) over each province to govern it. King Harald "Fairhair" is remembered and honoured by medieval historians as the first king of Norway, as in Haraldskvæði. 'King Of Kings' – the title was Alex's idea – is a fantastic and breathtaking soundtrack to Harald's history, being the first king unifying greater parts of Norway.

There are a couple of Skaldic poems Haraldskvæði and Glymdrápa that tell some of his story and you have a song on the album called 'Haraldskvæði', did these poems start your fascination with Harald the person?

I love Haraldskvæði, the Islandic Sagas, Faroese Sagas and all works of Snorri Sturlason. I have always been interested in history, Viking culture and expansion, and the happenings concerning Norway's kings. Harald Fairhair is to me the most interesting one, winning this important battle, having extraordinary aims and goals for his home country. Amazingly, the great battle took place where I was born and raised. In general, my birthplace and heritage plays a vital role in the band's origin. "I grew up by the sea, I played under the sun". These were the first lines of a poem and a song entitled 'Norwegian Lovesong' which I wrote some time before the birth of Leaves' Eyes in 2003. These lines happened to play a most significant role in the story of our band. Since our debut album 'Lovelorn', I have always felt a deep connection to the history, culture and nature of my home country, Norway.

As the album's story is a complex one with lots of twists and turns, did you find it hard to translate Harald's story to music?

I would say composing and lyrical writing go hand in hand, it's a parallel process. Composing, vocal lines, concepts and lyrics progressed in a parallel way. We decided that the album would have 12 songs, thematically structured into 12 chapters concerning Harald Fairhair. We needed two years all in all to reach our goal. We didn't work song by song - it was rather a process of one highly creative stream of passionate composing, going with the flow, taking in any kind of inspiration. As the composing and the recordings proceded we contacted people who are professional folk instrumentalists. Every instrument is recorded naturally on this production. It gives the album a very earthy, warm and unique sound to underline the expression and the theme every song conveys. We let our guest artists listen to the songs or parts of songs, moreover, we let them all have the freedom to add original ideas themselves to support my stories.

I mention in my review that for some reason, be it the move to a new label or a new special ingredient found by the band since your last release, that you seem to have really come out firing on all cylinders with 'King Of Kings'. You must all be very happy with how this album has turned out?

The move to AFM records definitely plays a huge role in this positive process. They have supported the production process from the very beginning. The basis for this fine, crystal-clear, broad and authentic sound was already obvious in the production of 'Symphony of the Night', however 'King Of Kings' has an even bigger, broader, earthy and more authentic soundtrack-oriented sound. The biggest production so far, I can tell you. We really wanted to make this album even more impressive. I would like to mention the broad aspect of the technical side of the production. Sometimes Alex had 300-400 recording channels to submit and mix in one single song! That's incredible but Alex is the man for this. It's fantastic to have our own studio with superb equipment and Alex's incredible knowledge about recording and production. This is the basis for everything we create and our artistic progress. Everything we create comes from the heart and soul. It feels so good to have AFM's support. Teamwork is of vital importance! This is also the reason why we entered the German charts at #15 with 'King Of Kings'.

You start your tour in October and hit the UK for seven shows in November. Is the UK an important place for Leave's Eyes?

Definitely. Our audiences in the UK and Ireland are growing every time we play; it's amazing how you embrace our music and art. We are so grateful and we can't wait to be back! We have a special group of supporters in the UK, really lovely friends!

While we're on the subject of playing live, will you playing the 'KOK' album in its entirety or will you select certain songs from it?

We are rehearsing right now and can't wait to play 'King Of Kings' live! We already played 'Halvdan the Black' in Latin-America and at MFVF at our headliner show in 2014. Our audiences seemed to appreciate the song, so many more 'King Of Kings' tracks will certainly come up soon. The show set up will be a secret for now, moreover, it depends on how much space we have on stage actually, and the financial resources to be honest. If we are invited to play with orchestra, choir, folk instruments and the swords in rock monument from my birth place, with huge pyros and animation on stage, we will certainly do it!

Now that you've started with Harald's Saga, will future albums feature his sons, Eric Bloodaxe and Haakon the Good and their stories?

What a brilliant idea! I have considered this, of course! Wait and see!

Finally Liv what does the next twelve months hold for you and Leaves' Eyes.

First, the tour of Europe, then Asia, including Japan for the first time, then a number of festivals. In December this year I will do a solo tour, playing songs from all my solo albums, including 'Theatre Of Tragedy' with Raymond as my special guest. There will be one show in London so stay tuned for good news soon!

Thundermother are, by all accounts, rock goddesses who live and breathe for their music; five hard rocking chicks who will blow your head off! Their debut album 'Rock 'n' Roll Disaster' hit the Swedish Hard Rock charts at number 2 last year, and their live performances have won them the respect and admiration of a whole host of fellow artists and bands including Zakk Wylde, Danko Jones, Motörhead, In Flames, Opeth and Airbourne.

The band were formed in Sweden back in 2010 when southern Swede and guitarist Filippa Nässil upped sticks to Stockholm to follow her Rock and Roll dreams. There, she encountered like-minded Italian guitarist Giorgia Carteri and the two set about the search for kindred spirits. It was a search that eventually uncovered drummer Tilda Stenqvist, bassist Linda Ström and gutsy Irish vocalist Clare Cunningham - completing a band that has the energy, ambition and talent to make a significant mark on the world of Hard Rock. With a kick ass new album ready to roll, their future undoubtedly looks both bright and thunderous.

Firework's Michael Anthony was suitably impressed when he reviewed said album in Issue 71. "You get the distinct impression that we're dealing with girls who like to deliver," he wrote, and set out on his own search to find out more. He finally caught up with singer Clare and guitarist Filippa and enquired politely about the new album, 'Road Fever', the challenge of being women in Rock and their hopes for the future.

How would you describe or define your sound?

Clare: If you dig AC/DC, Motörhead and similar artists then we will be right up your street! We have a very classic Hard Rock sound.

'Road Fever' kicks ass, if you don't mind me saying. You must be pleased with it?

Clare: Thank you! We really are! It was a slightly rushed finish but it kind of made it all the more enjoyable and the pressure kept us on our toes!

Filippa: Yeah, this is a better album than the first one, definitely! And these songs are great to play live. That's why we decided to have these on the album. We had many songs but those we chose for 'Road Fever' felt good in the rehearsals.

I'd say that 'Road Fever' is different in style to your first album. It's quite a 'traditional' Rock album in the sense that it's raw, raucous, uplifting and there's a lot of rebellious Rock 'n' Roll attitude in there. Is that fair?

Clare: I'd say that's a fair description, yes! I think it leans more toward the Motörhead feel rather than the classic AC/DC sound of the first album. We have still kept it classic though!

So, sex, drugs and Rock 'n' Roll – jaded stereotype or the meaning of life?

Clare: Ha, ha! Well, there's a little to that but we never really promote the drug aspect! We are very clean! So it's a bit of both!

Are there any new tracks that particularly excite you that can't wait for people to hear?

Clare: Our second single 'Deal With The Devil' – out now! – is up there with the top ones. 'FFWF' and 'Enemy' are great rocking numbers too. It's hard to pick just one!

Filippa: I love 'Rock 'n' Roll Sisterhood' because of the meaning of the lyrics, but 'Deal With The Devil' is my favourite to play live. Actually, 'Give Me Some Lights' is bad ass on guitar too.

Realistically, what do you think this album can do for Thundermother? How far can it take you?

Clare: I think we might reach out to a wider audience with this record. As we've opted for a punchier heavier feel, it will capture the heavier listener, but there are one or two surprises in there too.

Filippa: I agree. The first album sets the standard of a band. Now we can have more fun with it - and we did!

Where do you see yourselves in five years time?

Clare: Sipping martinis on our yachts in the Gulf of Mexico, ha, ha! Well, hopefully we'll have conquered most of the world, at least outside of Europe, and be selling millions of records!

Filippa: In a house in south Sweden with a big studio. I want to visit Clare in Mexico though, ha, ha! I love spicy food!

One of the things I like about the album is the real band feel and the sense of togetherness. The 'Rock 'n' Roll Sisterhood'! Is that just down to natural chemistry?

Clare: We, as five females, have this amazing chemistry that nobody else can share but us! It's very special and we figured we could also reach out to all the struggling females in this very male dominated world that is called 'Rock 'n' Roll'! We are a tight group and love each other as much as the music! Friendship for us comes above all.

Filippa: It's a view from the past that women are jealous of each other and not as good friends as males are. We wrote the lyrics together in this song and that's why there's more power to it. We love 'Rock 'n' Roll Sisterhood'.

Has being a group of women made things harder or easier for you?

Clare: In some ways it's harder as you don't really get the same respect, some of the time, as the males do in the industry, but it's easier in the sense that we are fresh and excited so attract a crowd for that.

Do you think it's easier for women to be taken seriously in Rock these days?

Clare: Like I mentioned above females tend not to gain the same respect but society is slowly changing.

Will you be touring in support of the album? And when will we see you back in the UK?

Clare: Yes, we have a European tour coming up, including a trip to Spain. We hope to be back in the UK really soon, as we LOVED being there last time! Fingers crossed for early next year.

Anything else you'd like to tell us?

Clare: We are super excited for the release of 'Road Fever' and hope all our dedicated and new fans will enjoy the record. We will hit you guys up a storm when we head back your way next year! Rock 'n' Roll!

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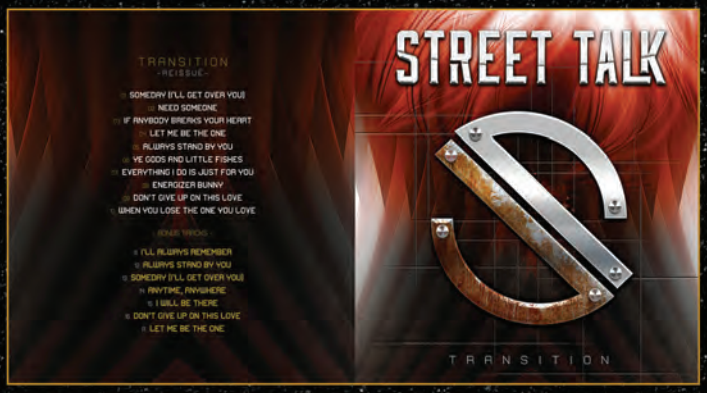
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03. IF ANYBODY BREAKS YOUR HEART
04. LET ME BE THE ONE
05. ALWAYS STAND BY YOU
06. WE GODS FIND LITTLE FISHES
07. EVERYTHING I DO IS JUST FOR YOU
08. ENERGIZER BUNNY
09. DON'T GIVE UP ON THIS LOVE
10. WHEN YOU LOSE THE ONE YOU LOVE
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